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Marine Corps suicides hit 10-year high

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

The number of suicides and suspected suicides among active-duty Marines hit a 10-year high in 2018, according to data released by the service this week.

The Marine Corps counted 44 verified active-duty suicides, 13 suspected suicides, pending verification, and an additional 18 verified

and suspected in the Reserve, for a total of 75, according to data provided to Stars and Stripes by Marine Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

The 75 cases among all Marines would top the previous high of 59 active-duty and Reserve suicides in 2012.

Among active-duty troops, 57 suicides and suspected suicides last year topped the previous high of 52 in 2009.

The Reserve started recording suicide data

in 2012, when there were 11 cases. Since then, the lowest number of suicides among reservists in one year — 10 — happened in 2017, according to Marine officials. Nineteen reservists committed suicide in 2016, the highest number.

The total number of Marines who served last year could not be confirmed Wednesday; however, there were about 186,000 active-duty Marines and 38,500 reservists during fiscal year

SEE MARINES ON PAGE 9

75

The number of confirmed and suspected suicides among Marines in 2018.



Facebook

Family of Navy linguist killed in Syria fights deployment regulation

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Navy Chief Petty Officer Shannon Mary Kent wasn't supposed to be in Syria.

Last year, the 35-year-old mother of two was slated to attend a clinical psychology doc-

toral program near Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

But an obscure Navy rule and a previous bout of cancer derailed those plans and led to her fifth combat deployment instead. She was killed less than two months later.

Now, her family wants to finish the fight started by Kent to undo the regulation.

"The regulation still hasn't been fixed and that's something we're working on now," said Joe Kent, 38, her husband and father to their two children. "We'd like to change it in her honor."

Shannon Kent, along with 18 others, including another U.S. servicemember, a Defense Intelligence Agency civilian and a Defense Department contractor, were killed Jan. 16 by a suicide bomber at a restaurant in the Syrian city of Manbij.

SEE LINGUIST ON PAGE 8

EUROPE

Civilians air health care complaints

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY

Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — A town hall meeting to discuss reductions in some health care services got heated Wednesday as Defense Department civilians complained of eroding access and difficulties with cross-cultural medical care, prompting the head of U.S. Army Garrison Italy to take to the microphone to defend health clinic officials.

"These are decisions being made back in the Pentagon," said Col. Erik Berdy, the garrison commander. "We're going through another round of reductions. It's hard to address. It's hard to accept."

The town meeting was called in part to discuss reductions in patient liaison and translation services for troops and their families who are referred to local Italian providers. But DOD civilians came to voice frustration with a more general lack of support.

Garrison officials could only do so much, Berdy said in response to some of the angry complaints.

"Frankly, readiness is where the chief of staff of the Army's at," he said, meaning that resources for civilian health care was farther down on the priority list. "I'll be frank: International SOS is here to stay."

International SOS is the insurance company Tricare has contracted with since 2014 for its overseas program. The company sent several of its managers to speak at the gathering.

Defense personnel and their families have experienced growing difficulties with a military health care system that



NANCY MONTGOMERY/Stars and Stripes

The Vicenza Health Center stopped delivering babies, performing surgery and routinely seeing Defense Department civilians five years ago, sending people to local Italian doctors. Officials recently announced reductions in translation services.

has been providing fewer direct services and more referrals.

Among the latest round of expected reductions is the decision not to replace the sole American medical doctor on the liaison team at San Bortolo hospital, who is retiring, said Lt. Col. Alex Montgomery, a health clinic administrator who oversees the patient liaison program.

The nine remaining liaisons would no longer translate medical records into English on a same-day basis, Montgomery said. Instead, the records would be translated by International SOS — in three business days for information deemed urgent and 10 days for routine matters.

That applied only to active-duty troops and their families, however.

Civilians not insured by Tricare would have to ask their insurers to provide for any medical record translation.

"Yeah, we contacted Blue Cross/Blue Shield," said Leca Good. "They don't do that."

For years, civilian employees and their families have enjoyed little access to the base clinic and no official liaison support when seeking Italian medical care.

"We're on our own and we're out here

dangling," Good said.

Montgomery apologized "for that feeling" and thanked Good for her feedback.

Some community members asked how they could know if Italian providers they were referred to were proficient, and others said that they'd had to pay thousands of dollars before being treated despite assurances that they would not.

International SOS personnel said they were working on "provider education" and urged that anyone with a problem call their 800 number or send them an email.

But it was firefighter Damon Favor who really lit into health center officials, whom he said were "disingenuous." Claiming that Defense Department civilians and retirees could make same-day "space available" appointments at the clinic, where he once worked, was an example, he said.

"I opened the clinic every day knowing there were zero appointments available," said Favor. "We know we're second-class citizens in the community," he said to applause. "Don't patronize us."

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Germany rejects calls to cap speed on its autobahns

BY AARON KNOWLES

Stars and Stripes

The German government has rejected a request to introduce speed caps on its autobahns — highways famous around the world for having no general speed limitations.

Recently, the National Platform on the Future of Mobility, a panel of transportation experts, proposed a federally mandated speed limit of 81 miles per hour for the autobahn network.

That sparked a debate within the government, with some ministers backing the proposal.

However, Transportation Minister Andreas Scheuer said the speed limit would be "against all common sense."

"German motorways are the safest roads in the world," Scheuer told the newspaper Bild am Sonntag, adding that the system of recommended limits has proven to be effective.

Speed limits apply on only 30 percent of Germany's autobahn network, which consists of more than 8,000 miles of motorways, according to Statista.com, a website that tracks statistical data.

Despite its reputation as a limitless superhighway, in reality rows of slow-moving trucks, traffic jams and frequent construction sites mean that higher speeds can usually be achieved only on relatively short stretches of freeway.

In a recent survey by the German public broadcaster ARD, 51 percent of respondents were in favor of the 130 kilometer limit and 47 percent were against it.

The speed limit proposal was motivated by safety concerns, a desire to bring German speed limits in line with those in neighboring countries, and as part of an initiative to lower carbon emissions.

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MILITARY



MATTHEW FREDERICKS/Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force

A United Arab Emirates air force F-16 approaches a U.S. Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker for aerial refueling in 2016. The Pentagon announced it will audit refueling missions in the Africa and Central Command theaters after accounting issues with missions to refuel UAE and Saudi Arabian aircraft.

US to expand audit of ally refueling reimbursements

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Defense Department investigators will launch an audit of refueling missions in the Africa and Central Command areas of operation to determine whether the military is getting paid back for supplies provided to local partners.

The upcoming inspector general probe, announced Monday, follows recent revelations about accounting errors that resulted in failures to properly bill Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for refueling missions that supported the Saudi-led coalition in fighting in Yemen.

In December, the Pentagon said it would seek a \$331 million reimbursement for those missions. Now, the inspector general appears concerned that billing irregularities could be more widespread.

In a letter to U.S. Africa Command, CENTCOM and the Defense Logistics Agency, the inspector general said the objective is to determine whether the military is getting fully reimbursed for refueling missions. It will conduct audits in Stuttgart, Tampa, Fla., and Manama, Bahrain.

While the U.S. decided late last year to cease refueling Saudi aircraft involved in missions in Yemen, the military has a long history of providing fuel support to partners in Africa and across the Middle East.

In recent years, the U.S. Air Force has routinely

provided air-to-air refueling for allies in support of operations against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. It also provides extensive support to the French military in Africa.

Since 2013, Air Force units have regularly deployed in support of Operation Juniper Micron, which supports French counterterrorism operations in western Africa. KC-135 Stratotankers are typically positioned in Spain for rotations to Africa.

French counterterrorism efforts in Africa are focused around Mali and Niger and are focused on disrupting the flow of Islamic militants in the region. French Mirage fighter planes were part of the emergency force that responded when U.S. troops came under attack during an October 2017 ambush in Niger that left four soldiers dead.

"Overall our mission is global reach, and we hope to help our allies by extending their flight time that is necessary to complete their mission," an Air Force statement in September about refueling operations in Africa said.

AFRICOM on Wednesday said it couldn't comment on the upcoming inspector general audit, but added "all movements are done in coordination with applicable host nations and support partners."

"We plan to continue this support and we constantly examine more efficient ways to provide support to our allies," AFRICOM spokeswoman Samantha Reho said.

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Operations Support Squadron, includes the skies over Tokyo's western suburbs and parts of Saitama, Tochigi, Gunma, Kanagawa, Shizuoka, Niigata, Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures.

Japanese officials plan to use the airspace to increase capacity at Haneda International Airport, one of two major gateways to visitors to the Japanese capital.

To get access to the airspace they had to negotiate with the U.S. military, which regards the area as important for maintaining its readiness to defend Japan.

The proposed new flight path would

mainly be used by international flights in late afternoon, an official with Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism said in November. About 14 flights would pass through the airspace each hour, he said.

The parties have now agreed on a plan that will allow more flights into Haneda, USFJ spokesman Air Force Col. John Hutcheson said in an email Wednesday.

"This basic agreement ... reflects the United States unequivocal support for a successful 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games as well as Japan's goal to increase

tourism to 40 million travelers by 2020," he said.

The two sides will continue to finalize the technical procedures needed to implement the plan.

"The agreement ... allows for increased civilian air traffic while ensuring safety and preserving U.S. military operational capability to support Japan's defense and contribute to regional peace and security," Hutcheson said.

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Lockheed pushes back after DOD criticism of F-35

By AARON GREGG

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Executives from Bethesda, Md.-based defense giant Lockheed Martin sought to reassure investors after a top Defense Department official criticized the cost of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, a \$90 million jet that is the crown jewel of Lockheed's business, in a news conference Tuesday morning.

Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan, a former Boeing executive, said the F-35 "has room for a lot more performance" in response to questions about whether he is biased toward his former employer, which competes with Lockheed for Pentagon weapons deals. His comments come amid news reports that the Pentagon is considering buying F-15 fighter jets from Boeing.

"I am biased toward performance," Shanahan said. "I am biased toward giving the taxpayer their money's worth. And the F-35, unequivocally, I can say, has a lot of opportunity for more performance."

Lockheed Martin chief executive Marilyn Hewson responded by saying she had been assured by Defense Department officials that any purchase of Boeing F-15s would not affect how many F-35s it buys.

"If they chose to have an order on F-15 ... it won't be at the expense of F-35 quantities," Hewson told investors. "I'm hearing that directly from the leadership in the Pentagon ... not just our suspicion, but I've been told that directly. So I'm not concerned about that."

Almost since its inception, the F-35 has been criticized by acquisition experts and politicians from both parties for its soaring costs. Longtime chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee John McCain called it a "poster child for acquisition malpractice" as he took the Pentagon and Lockheed

"If they chose to have an order on F-15 ... it won't be at the expense of F-35 quantities."

Marilyn Hewson
Lockheed Martin chief executive

Martin to task for delays and cost overruns.

President Donald Trump drew attention to the plane's "out-of-control" costs in a tweet early in his presidency in which he threatened to "price out a comparable F-18 Super Hornet" to save money on the F-35 as the Defense Department was negotiating with Lockheed Martin over the price of its 10th shipment of 90 planes.

The Defense Department later announced a deal that was roughly in line with what had already been planned, shaving an estimated \$72 million in costs.

The F-35 has continued to be a major driver of business for Lockheed Martin.

Earlier this year, the company announced that it had added more than 250 aircraft to its order backlog at an estimated value of \$19 billion, bringing the company's overall order backlog to more than 400 aircraft.

In a Tuesday call with investors, Hewson seemed to push back on criticism of the plane's costs, pointing to her company's progress toward getting the plane's unit cost down to \$80 million. The plane's sticker price dropped below \$90 million for the first time last year as the company has been producing the planes at a faster rate.

"We're going to continue to drive the price down ... and we won't stop there," Hewson said. "We will always be looking at ways that we can take cost down in the program as it continues to mature and grow."

USFJ, Japan agree to open airspace around Yokota for Tokyo Olympics

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Jets bringing visitors to the Tokyo Olympics will be allowed to pass through airspace surrounding an American military base following an agreement reached by U.S. Forces Japan and the Japanese government.

Officials from both countries have haggled in recent months over control of airspace around Yokota, home to the 374th Air Wing, 5th Air Force and USFJ.

The airspace, controlled by the 374th

Operations Support Squadron, includes the skies over Tokyo's western suburbs and parts of Saitama, Tochigi, Gunma, Kanagawa, Shizuoka, Niigata, Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures.

Japanese officials plan to use the airspace to increase capacity at Haneda International Airport, one of two major gateways to visitors to the Japanese capital.

To get access to the airspace they had to negotiate with the U.S. military, which regards the area as important for maintaining its readiness to defend Japan.

The proposed new flight path would

MILITARY

7 Navy SEALs given immunity to testify in war crime case

The Orange County (Calif.) Register

Seven Navy SEALs have been granted immunity and are expected to testify against their former teammate, a Navy SEAL chief, who will stand trial accused of murdering a teen Islamic State fighter, Navy officials confirmed on Tuesday.

Chief Edward "Eddie" Gallagher, a highly decorated Navy SEAL and special warfare operator, is expected to go on trial Feb. 19 at a court-martial at Naval Base San

Diego.

The decision to grant immunity to the SEALs came as part of a motion hearing held Jan. 25 by court-martial judge Navy Capt. Aaron Rugh. At that hearing, Rugh reviewed motions filed by Gallagher's defense and the government prosecutors, said Brian O'Rourke, spokesman for Navy Region Southwest, the court-martial's convening authority.

Gallagher, 39, a decorated SEAL who was arrested Sept.

11 while he was being treated at Camp Pendleton's Intrepid Spirit Center, pleaded "not guilty" to all war crime charges he is accused of committing during a 2017 deployment in Iraq, said Phillip Stackhouse, a San Diego-based attorney and Marine veteran who is defending Gallagher.

Gallagher, who has served in the Navy for 19 years, is accused of premeditated murder in the fatal stabbing of a 15-year-old ISIS fighter, according to the prosecu-

tion. He also is accused of posing with the corpse while taping a re-enlistment video.

Gallagher is also charged with shooting a man in June 2017 and a woman in July of that year; both civilians classified as noncombatants, according to the charge sheets.

Navy prosecutors also are charging Gallagher with obstructing the investigation once his unit returned to San Diego.

Lt. Jacob Portier, a Navy officer

who supervised Gallagher's platoon, was charged with various offenses tied to the case on Jan. 22, including allegations he conducted the SEAL's alleged battlefield re-enlistment ceremony and encouraged enlisted personnel to pose for photos with the corpse.

Portier's attorney, Jay Sullivan, said his client will plead not guilty to all charges.

Rugh scheduled another hearing for Feb. 12.

S. Korean ROTC cadets hone leadership skills at Texas A&M

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — A group of South Korean army ROTC cadets departed Tuesday to hone their skills at a monthlong leadership development course at Texas A&M University.

The university in College Station, Texas, has been hosting students from the allied nation annually in the program since 2014 and boasts one of the best Reserve Officer Training Corps programs in the nation.

The 40 cadets will gain a global perspective and training in day-to-day skills such as roll call, physical training and overcoming obstacles as well as tactics and operation orders. They also will tour the Alamo in San Antonio and a veterans' memorial park "to understand the role, sacrifice and responsibility taken by the U.S. military during the Korean War," according to a press release from the South Korean military.

The class, which was selected from universities nationwide according to proficiency in English, military expertise, grade-point average and physical fitness, will return on Feb. 24. The program has mandated that women fill 10 percent of the slots.

The \$140,000 program is funded by South Korean ROTC scholarship funds, the universities involved and alumni associations, officials said.

The United States maintains some 28,500 service-members in South Korea, which remains technically at war with the North since their 1950-53 conflict ended in an armistice instead of a peace treaty.

Lee Won-wook, a student at Seoul National University, was quoted as saying he was ready to work hard and was looking forward to being transformed into "an exemplary cadet."

news@stripes.com



Courtesy of the South Korean military

South Korean ROTC cadets look at their itinerary before leaving Seoul to participate in a leadership course at Texas A&M University.



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MILITARY

Shanahan makes public debut in DOD role

BY PAUL SONNE
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — With the cameras switched off and recording devices scattered in front of him, Patrick Shanahan made his debut in the Pentagon briefing room Tuesday as acting defense secretary, conducting the first public news conference of what could be years of CEO-style leadership or a short stint as a stand-in before the appointment of a permanent replacement.

Shanahan, a longtime Boeing executive who served as deputy to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis for some 18 months, is essentially in tryouts. His unusually public audition to join President Donald Trump's Cabinet on a permanent basis has brought a new air of caution to the Pentagon and at least temporarily reduced the public profile of a Defense Department boosted for two years by Mattis' stature.

Sitting at a desk instead of standing at a lectern, Shanahan could not say for sure Tuesday whether he would be staying in his job, acknowledging that his mother sends him prayer emoji. His staff continued Mattis' tactic of avoiding televised briefings, lest the president see something he doesn't like, but Shanahan joked that his mother would like to see more of him on

television. The short answer to the question of his fate: He will stay or go as told.

"It's really whatever the president or the country would like me to do," he said. "That's what I'm prepared to do."

Whether Shanahan, 56, can serve in an acting capacity indefinitely, without nomination and confirmation in the Senate, is a matter of some debate. Trump has said he likes keeping officials in acting status because it gives him more flexibility.

The president has heaped praise on Shanahan, saying on Twitter that he is doing a great job and describing him as fantastic in a speech at the Pentagon. Trump has said Shanahan could remain in the Pentagon's top job "for a long time."

In some respects, Shanahan is everything Mattis is not. Despite at one point serving as general manager of Boeing's missile defense program, he is largely an outsider in Washington, while Mattis spent his entire professional life in the military.

Whereas Shanahan prides himself on being a student of business, Mattis made his name as a student of war, leading troops in combat and crafting views on alliances, military training and battlefield strategy during four decades in the Marine Corps. Known as the "War-

rior Monk," Mattis prided himself on being an ideas man; Shanahan, after more than three decades at Boeing, emphasizes streamlining processes and better execution. Mattis came into the Pentagon with a vaunted public profile and long-standing relationships on Capitol Hill; Shanahan remains largely unknown to the public and owes his Washington career to Trump.

Shanahan began his briefing Tuesday by saying he would chart the same course that Mattis set for the Pentagon. Mattis' primary priorities were to reorient the military toward great-power competition with Russia and China, bolster alliances across the globe and build what he regularly described as a more "lethal" fighting force.

"No change to the priorities," Shanahan said. "No change to the strategy. It's really 'Go faster on the implementation and execution.'"

Before his resignation over differences with Trump, Mattis focused intently on developments facing U.S. forces overseas and crafted a hectic travel schedule to visit foreign nations and leaders. He was as much as a force in foreign policy as his counterparts at the State Department.

Shanahan, who has relatively little formal foreign policy experience, signaled a more inward focus Tuesday, noting that he would not be traveling as much and would

concentrate on closing the "seams" he had noticed in the organization of the Defense Department in his time as Mattis' No. 2.

In his first month on the job, Shanahan has been working on many of the same issues that occupied him while deputy secretary. He rolled out the Pentagon's new missile defense strategy, which he had worked on previously, and will soon unveil the department's budget request for the 2020 fiscal year, which he has described as a "masterpiece" and evidence of the military's move away from counterinsurgency toward great-power competition. Shanahan also served as the point person for Trump's Space Force in his previous job and signaled Tuesday that he would continue that focus.

Unlike Mattis — whom allies often viewed as a counterpart to Trump willing to stand up for traditional American foreign policy values — Shanahan has crafted an image of a loyal corporate-style foot soldier, particularly during his oversight of the Space Force plan.

Asked whether he would tell Trump that it is inappropriate for a president to deliver partisan political jabs during speeches to military personnel — as Trump did at the Pentagon this month and at a base in Iraq in December — Shanahan said he is always ready to give the president feedback.



Acting Defense Secretary
Patrick Shanahan

It has been a long-standing responsibility of the Defense Department not to politicize the military, Shanahan said, pledging to work to keep a nonpolitical environment at the Pentagon.

"Why that is so important is that we recruit from all parts of the United States," Shanahan said.

"This is an all-volunteer force."

Whether Shanahan becomes a leading force within the Trump administration on foreign policy decisions remains to be seen. On Tuesday, he largely deferred questions about progress on a peace deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan to the State Department.

Though the Pentagon usually draws up options for possible conflicts and sends them to the White House, Shanahan suggested that White House national security adviser John Bolton was taking the lead on Venezuela policy and had created a "number of options" on what to do there.

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WAR ON TERRORISM

Kurdish leader: No sign of US exit from Syria

By KAREN DEYOUNG
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — More than a month after President Donald Trump announced that U.S. forces were leaving Syria, there has been no sign of troop departures or a change in the relationship between Americans and their Syrian Kurdish allies, according to the leadership of the political umbrella organization of the Kurdish fighters.

"There has been no change in the situation on the ground," said Ilham Ahmed, who heads the executive committee of the Syrian Democratic Council. The situation is "just like before" Trump's announcement, he said.

Trump administration and defense officials have provided little information on how the departure is being organized, or on what timeline. Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said Tuesday that the military continued a "deliberate, coordinated, disciplined withdrawal" from Syria but that the process remained in the "early stages."

Fighters of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Defense Forces, who have led the ground fight against Islamic State in Syria, have expressed concern over the withdrawal, and Shanahan, at a Pentagon news conference, said that "99.5 percent plus" of militant-controlled territory had been returned to the Syrians. "Within a couple of weeks, it'll be 100 percent," he said.

The Defense Department announced on Jan. 11 that a withdrawal had begun, but it appeared to cover only the packing up of limited amounts of equipment.

Trump said last month that the defeat of the militants meant the United States no longer had a mission in Syria and that about 2,000 U.S. troops there were "coming home now." After criticism from Congress — and the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in protest — Trump said the withdrawal timeline would be flexible.

"We expect the promise of a safe zone ... to come into place within a few months," he said. "Otherwise, we will create it."

Erdogan, who visited Moscow last week, said he also expected Russia to help.

Ahmed, the Kurdish political leader, said that Turkish establishment of a safe zone in Syrian territory was unacceptable, and she called for international observers in the area. "Nobody has discussed this with us," she said of the buffer zone.

She also denied what Erdogan has said was a U.S.-Turkish agreement that heavy weaponry given to Kurdish forces for the anti-ISIS fight would be returned when the militants were defeated.

"There is no agreement like this," Ahmed said. "There has never been a discussion about removing the weapons from us."

ISIS is "still there," she said of its presence in Syria.

Although she was not scheduled to meet with the president, Ahmed had an impromptu exchange with the president Monday night, when they were dining separately at Trump's hotel in Washington. Trump was attending a Great America Committee fundraiser.

Introduced to her, Trump shook her hand and exclaimed "I love the Kurds," Ahmed said. She thanked him and asked that he not "let the Kurds be slaughtered" by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, she said. Trump responded by telling her not to worry, that the Kurds were "not going to be killed."

In addition to the buffer zone, Erdogan has said the Turkish military would take over the fight against ISIS remnants in Syria. Though Trump has voiced approval of that plan, U.S. military officials have expressed skepticism about Turkish capabilities and intentions.

Over the past several weeks, top U.S. diplomatic and military officials have met with their Turkish counterparts, beginning with an early January trip by national security adviser John Bolton. Erdogan canceled a scheduled meeting with him after Bolton said that protection of the Kurds was a precondition of a U.S. withdrawal.

Instead, Turkey has demanded that the United States remove the Kurds from the border area, and provide air and logistical support for Turkish military actions against "terrorists" in Syria. Speaking to members of his Justice and Development Party on Friday, Erdogan said: "Our patience is not unlimited. We are not going to wait for eternity for the promises given to us to be fulfilled."

"We expect the promise of a safe zone ... to come into place within a few months," he said. "Otherwise, we will create it."

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PHOTOS BY IBABA NEWS AGENCY/AP

Al-Qaida-linked fighters take part in a military drill in December in northern Syria, where the militants have wrested control of a large area from rival insurgents.

Al-Qaida's advance in northern Syria threatens fragile truce

By BASSEM MROUE
Associated Press

BEIRUT — It took only a few days for al-Qaida-linked militants to seize more than two dozen towns and villages in northern Syria from rival insurgents earlier this month, cementing their control over an area the size of neighboring Lebanon.

The advance by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or the Levant Liberation Committee, was the most serious blow yet to a September cease-fire brokered by Russia and Turkey that averted a major government offensive in Idlib province, the last main stronghold of the Syrian opposition.

It highlighted the growing threat posed by al-Qaida at a time when its rival, Islamic State, is on the verge of defeat and the U.S. is preparing to withdraw its 2,000 troops from Syria. Although HTS has formally severed ties with al-Qaida, experts say it is still closely linked to the global network founded by Osama bin Laden and could use its base in Syria to launch attacks in the West.

Fawaz Gerges, professor of Middle Eastern politics at the London School of Economics, said there is a "real danger" that the group's advance "will not only worsen the humanitarian crisis for the 3 million inhabitants there, but also give (President Bashar) Assad and his allies the justification to assault the province."

"Such a scenario would be as devastatingly bloody as the battle for Aleppo," he said, referring to the months of heavy fighting over Syria's largest city in 2016, which killed thousands of people and ended with government forces and their allies capturing the rebel-held east.

HTS includes large numbers of battle-hardened al-Qaida fighters, and its capture of most of rebel-held Syria could force aid agencies to withdraw, leaving tens of thousands of civilians to fend for themselves. The oppo-



Al-Qaida-linked militants learn how to use a heavy weapon in the countryside of Idlib, Syria, in November.

sition's Free Aleppo Medical Directorate said that some 250,000 people will lose medical support after 43 facilities it runs cease operations due to a drop in aid from Western agencies after the latest HTS offensive.

The government has meanwhile stepped up its bombardment of Idlib and neighboring rebel-held areas. Pro-government media say Defense Minister Gen. Ali Ayoub and Brig. Gen. Suheil al-Hassan, who commands the elite Tiger Force, have recently visited the front lines with Idlib, raising fears of a new government offensive.

HTS now controls an area of about 3,475 square miles, or about 5 percent of Syria's territory. The area is home to some 3 million people, many of whom have been displaced from other parts of the country.

Turkey has nearly a dozen observation posts in Idlib, but has shifted its focus farther east, where it is preparing to launch an offensive against Syrian Kurdish forces.

Ankara, which supports the opposition, fears the Syrian government is trying to undermine the September agreement.

Russia, a key ally of the Syrian government, has urged Turkey to act more resolutely in reining in militants in Idlib, who have launched attacks on Syrian government forces and the Russian military. Russia said last week that the escalation of hostilities in Idlib threatens the Russian air base in the neighboring coastal province of Latakia.

The first 10 days of January turned rebel-held parts of northern Syria upside down.

The powerful Nour al-Din el-Zinki rebel group dissolved itself after days of fighting with HTS during which it lost more than two dozen villages. The ultraconservative Ahrar al-Sham, one of the largest groups in northern Syria, also surrendered following attacks by HTS.

Two other groups, Thuwar al-Sham and Bayareq al-Islam, handed over Atareb, an important stronghold in Aleppo province, to HTS and withdrew north toward a region held by Turkish troops.

Jaysh al-Ahrar handed over its checkpoints and said it would recognize the HTS-run civil authority.

WAR ON TERRORISM

Taliban open to working with Afghan government

BY KATHY GANNON
Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — The Taliban said Wednesday they are not seeking a monopoly on power in a future administration in Afghanistan but are looking for ways to co-exist with Afghan institutions — the most conciliatory statement to date from the militants.

The statement came amid intensified U.S.-led efforts to resolve the long-running Afghanistan War. U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad reported this week that there had been "agreements in principle" toward a framework for peace with the Taliban, who now control almost half of the country and carry out near-daily attacks, mainly targeting Afghan security forces and government officials.

Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman based in the Gulf Arab country of Qatar where the Taliban have a political office, said that once U.S. forces withdraw from Afghanistan, the Taliban want to live with other Afghans, "tolerate one another and start life like brothers." Shaheen's statement was provided in an exclusive audio message to The Associated Press.

"After the end of the occupation, Afghans should forget their

'We believe in an inclusive Afghan world, where all Afghans can see themselves in it.'

Suhail Shaheen

Taliban spokesman based in Qatar

past and tolerate one another and start life like brothers," Shaheen said. "We believe in an inclusive Afghan world, where all Afghans can see themselves in it."

Shaheen said another round of talks with Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy, is planned for Feb. 25 in Doha.

Khalilzad, who held talks with the Taliban for six days last week in Qatar, said during a visit to Kabul on Monday that much more remains to be done but that there had been significant progress toward an agreement with the insurgents.

In turn, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani assured Afghans that no deals would be made without the Kabul government's awareness and full participation.

U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan in November 2001 in response to the Sept. 11 attacks and ousted the Taliban, which had harbored al-Qaida and its leader, Osama bin Laden. The Taliban,

which had ruled Afghanistan since 1996, had imposed a harsh form of Islamic law.

Shaheen also said the U.S. and the Taliban will establish joint technical teams to work out details of a future U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan as well as ways of preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a haven for terrorist groups such as al-Qaida.

Khalilzad, who was appointed in September, has stepped up efforts to find a negotiated end to Afghanistan's protracted war that will allow an eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces and bring to an end America's longest military engagement, which has cost Washington about \$1 trillion.

President Donald Trump has also expressed frustration with the U.S. continued involvement in Afghanistan, lending a greater urgency to an early settlement.

Despite intense negotiations with Khalilzad, the Taliban have



TARIQ AZIZ/AP

Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen, pictured in 2001, said Wednesday in an audio message to The Associated Press that the Taliban are looking for ways to co-exist with Afghan institutions.

refused to negotiate directly with Kabul and often refer to the Afghan government as puppets of the United States. Khalilzad has also pressed Ghani's government, which is deeply divided, to cobble together a strong negotiating team.

Atta-ul Rahman Salim, deputy head of the Afghan High Peace Council, which comprises top Afghan clerics and other prominent figures, said the only way to peace is through direct talks with the government.

"If the Taliban really want to join the peace process, the best

and easy way to start is with direct peace talks with the Afghan government," he said, adding that "there is a big difference between what you say and what you do."

Despite the Taliban insurgents' refusal to negotiate with Kabul, Shaheen's message appeared directed at a wide array of stakeholders in Afghanistan — possibly even Ghani's government — who could work together to hasten U.S. troop pullout.

"The withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan is a shared responsibility and a pride for all Afghans," Shaheen said.

Afghans leery of return to Taliban rule

BY PAMELA CONSTABLE
The Washington Post

KABUL, Afghanistan — There is nothing on paper, only the vague outline of an agreement between American and Taliban negotiators in Qatar that could lead to U.S. troops withdrawing. There are more talks to come, and U.S. officials have said any final deal with the Islamic insurgents must include a "dialogue" among Afghans.

But as news of the tentative accord spread Tuesday, the same question was worrying many Kabul residents — middle-aged women who remembered being forced to wear burqas, day laborers who fled rural fighting, college students who have grown up wearing jeans and surfing the internet. What if the Taliban come back to power?

It seems unthinkable, after 17 years of elected government, burgeoning malls and apartment complexes, ubiquitous cellphones and ATMs, that this capital of 6 million could again become a cowed, deserted city patrolled by turbaned religious enforcers with whips.

But not necessarily impossible. Despite the tantalizing interlude of a cease-fire in June, when Taliban fighters mingled politely with urban residents before melting back into the hills, some experts and officials said the Sunni

militia's puritanical beliefs have never softened and that their goal, though now obscured by diplomatic language, remains the full-fledged imposition of Islamic law and conservative religious mores.

"For Afghans who have gone through a lot with the Taliban, who remember living in a ghost city full of zombies, and for some one like me who investigated their brutality and executions, it's hard to believe they have changed," said Nader Nadery, a close aide to President Ashraf Ghani and a former official of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

Like a variety of other Afghans, Nadery expressed concern that American officials, in their eagerness to reach a settlement and bring home U.S. troops, would squander their leverage to force the Taliban to honor any pledge to share power or respect the democratic institutions and norms that have evolved since the fall of Taliban in 2001.

"The Taliban say they want to talk with many Afghans, not the government," Nadery noted. "But that would undermine the state, the Constitution, the structures that have been built by Afghans and their international partners over 17 years, at the sacrifice of several thousand American lives and tens of thousands of Afghan lives. We will not give them that."

Some Afghans, especially those who have been displaced or im-

poverished by years of war, said that restoring peace was more important than the details of a settlement. Several pointed out that Afghanistan was crime-free and safe during the five years of Taliban rule, and said they would be happy to see the group back in power if it restored security.

"I am not against them, but we need to ask them whether they are still the same as the past," said Abdul Hamid, 45, a construction laborer and former soldier.

A larger number expressed strong opposition to any Taliban comeback attempt, saying that Afghan society had changed dramatically and would no longer accept the rigid religious code the militia once enforced.

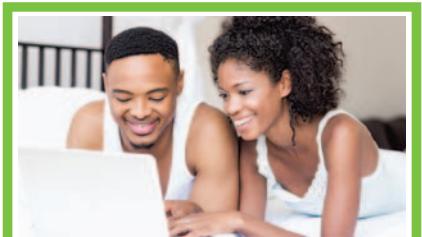
"They cannot bully people any more. This is a democratic time, and they can't take us 20 years back," said Faisal Habibi, 20, an accounting student who was a toddler when the Taliban regime lost power. "If they tried to use force, people would rise up and defend their rights."

The Taliban have not spelled out what role they want to play in Afghan governance and society, perhaps as a bargaining ploy, but they have never hidden their religious convictions. They have installed functional governing systems in numerous districts they control, and have shown some signs of moderation such as allowing girls to attend school.



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MILITARY

Linguist: Language in Navy rules kept Kent from attending doctoral program

FROM FRONT PAGE

She was the first female U.S. servicemember killed in Syria since the U.S.-led coalition's campaign against Islamic State began there in late 2014.

Kent was part of a small, secretive cryptologic intelligence community. She was based out of Fort Meade, Md., and part of the Navy's Cryptologic Warfare Activity 66, a unit within Cryptologic Warfare Group 6 that focuses on national, strategic and tactical level intelligence, military officials have said.

"She was doing intelligence legwork. They most certainly were not going out to lunch," Joe Kent, a retired Green Beret warrant officer, said of his wife's last moments. "They wanted to run down every last bit of ISIS."

Kent was due to return to the United States by April. She had hoped to attend Officer Development School in June, followed by her postponed academic plans as part of her commissioning program in August.

Last year, the Navy essentially disqualifed Kent from pursuing her doctoral studies because she previously had thyroid cancer.

"If we are healthy enough to deploy worldwide, why are we not healthy enough to pursue officer programs?" Shannon Kent wrote in an April 2018 letter to the then-chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the late Arizona Republican John McCain, who died in August.

Joe Kent remained stunned at the Navy's denial.

"It's pretty unbelievable she was considered physically fit to be deployable and ... for a special operation in Syria, but not for a classroom to be a psychologist," he said.

Last week, Kent's family wrote to Adm. William Moran, vice chief of naval operations, to ask for his help to change the rule that they contend has blocked some enlisted personnel from becoming officers.

The family met Moran at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware when Kent's remains were returned Jan. 19 from overseas. She is slated to be interred at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia in the coming weeks.

"Before she is laid to her final rest, Chief Kent's family requests that you make this change happen," her father-in-law, Christopher Kent, wrote Moran on the family's behalf in a Jan. 24 letter.

The Navy said the regulation is under review but no final decision has been made.

"The Navy mourns the loss of a great sailor and offers condolences to her family," said Lt. Cmdr. Shawn Eklund, a Navy spokesman. "The office of the vice chief of naval operations did receive correspondence from her family and has asked the chief of navy personnel to review the regulation regarding the physical examination standards for enlisted sailors seeking a commission."

Fighting cancer and a Navy regulation

Kent, a marathon runner and mother-of-one son, started to

feel lethargic in 2016.

That summer, the new mother was diagnosed with thyroid cancer while her husband was deployed. Quickly, doctors determined she required surgery and her thyroid was removed.

"She didn't exactly tell me" at the time, Joe Kent said. "She said, 'I just had it cut out, it's good.' Treatment was pretty quick."

There was no chemotherapy, and Kent received several scans showing that she was cleared of cancer in subsequent years.

The couple suspected the thyroid cancer was related to the burn pits that the 15-year Navy veteran was exposed to during her four combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan in her 20s.

As she fended off the cancer, Kent was completing her master's degree in psychology through Chicago-based Adler University and applied for the Navy's doctoral program in psychology at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.

Kent saw the program as the perfect solution to merging her new life as a mom with her work in the Navy. The Kents' two sons were born in 2015 and 2017.

"She had found the pathway to do both, but it was yanked out from underneath her," Joe Kent said. "She figured it fit in with where we were at as a family. She would not have avoided deployment, but she was a new mom."

Kent wanted to help service-members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, he said. And with that, there would be less chance she would deploy into combat zones.

"She was very interested in helping out veterans," Joe Kent said. "She saw psychology ... as a way to stay in the community to contribute to the fight and also help her fellow veterans."

Kent was accepted and got initial Navy clearance to attend the psychology program in early February 2018. However, by the end of the month, that changed.

The Navy then said Kent had to meet higher medical standards reserved for joining the service versus the requirements for remaining an active servicemember. The service ruled her out from the program because of her previous cancer.

A regulation contained within several sections of Chapter 15 of the Navy's Manual of Medical Department, which covers physical standards for medical examinations, lists several health conditions, including cancer, that can disqualify servicemembers from receiving a commission.

"The causes for rejection," reads section 15-34 of the chapter, which goes on to list several health conditions, including "tumor of thyroid or other structures of the neck."

Within days of her denial, Kent received orders deploying her to a combat zone, her family said.

"This is discriminatory not just towards me, but any enlisted sailor who has aspirations to commission from active duty," Shannon Kent wrote last year in her letter to McCain. The Kents didn't get a response to the letter, Joe Kent said.



Courtesy of Joe Kent

Shannon Mary Kent — shown in Balad, Iraq, in 2007, on her first combat deployment — was a Navy chief petty officer on her fifth combat deployment when she was killed Jan. 16 in Manbij, Syria.

But staff for Maryland Democratic Sens. Ben Cardin and Chris Van Hollen worked with Kent in her efforts last year. Van Hollen's office took the lead on Kent's case on behalf of the Maryland delegation, Cardin said.

"We are deeply saddened by the loss of Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent this past month," Cardin said in a statement. "Chief

Kent was an incredible leader who honorably served her country and the Navy. Ms. Kent worked with my office and Sen. Van Hollen's office on an issue related to her eligibility to become a commissioned officer in the Navy."

A rock star

A badass. A rock star. Superwoman. A force to be reckoned with. These are the descriptions friends, family and colleagues share of Shannon Kent.

With her death, her husband, their 18-month-old and 3-year-old sons, and a wide circle of relatives and friends have been left reeling.

"She is the most patriotic person I have ever met. She loved our country, she gave her life for the country," said Army Staff Sgt. Ali Hassoon, a longtime Kent family friend and neighbor. "She just wanted to serve and continue to serve."

Hassoon met Shannon Kent at military training in 2013. Hassoon, a native Iraqi, didn't know how to swim, but Kent taught him, he said.

Before her deployment, Hassoon's family joined the Kents for Thanksgiving. Shannon Kent, who recently started working in ceramics and decorated her home with worldly influences, wanted to host a multicultural Thanksgiving, Hassoon said.

"She and Joe would have the turkey ready, we would bring the kabobs and dolma," he remembered. "When we left, Shannon gave a hug that was a little longer. She said, 'I will see you guys when I come back.'"

Hassoon said he admired the Kents and called them "patriotic." The couple met at military training in Fort Belvoir, Va. in 2013. As Shannon attempted to park her car, she locked eyes with Joe standing in the parking lot.

Then, she plowed into another vehicle.

"She shrugged and I thought,

"That is kind of funny. I was like, 'This is a cool customer right here,'" Joe Kent remembered.

The Pine Plains, N.Y., native signed up for the military in December 2003 shortly after high school, fueled by her 9/11 attacks and her service-oriented family.

Her father, a state police officer, and her uncle, now a retired firefighter, were responders to the World Trade Center attack in New York City. Kent's father, Col. Stephen Smith, is deputy superintendent and field commander for New York State Police, the agency's third-highest ranking post.

Kent was gifted at picking up languages. She learned Spanish so she could talk with workers at the stables where she rode horses as a teen, her family said. In high school, Shannon Kent learned French in a few short months.

After 9/11, she wanted to learn Arabic. So in 2005, she graduated from the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif., after learning four dialects spoken by Arabs, her friends and family said.

She also knew Portuguese, Hassoon said. Kent and Hassoon often spoke in their native Arabic.

"She was the best linguist I ever worked with," he said. "She just loved languages. She just had an ear, she would pick up a language right away."

Honoring Shannon

When the Navy rejected Kent for the doctoral program and several subsequent waiver applications, she began researching how to fight the requirement that derailed her plans.

It was classic Kent, her friends and family said. She would come across an idea, tirelessly research and quickly figure out a plan to put in place by the next day, said Say Kent, her sister-in-law.

In the summer of 2018, Shannon, with her husband's help, lobbied lawmakers from her home state of New York and new home in Maryland, where the Kents have lived for several years.

The Kents had hoped to have a new provision attached to the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, legislation that dictates policy and spending at the Pentagon. They were not successful.

"We want the regulation changed ... to retention standards," Joe Kent said. "Basically,

if you are fit enough to remain in the service, you should be fit enough to apply for a commissioning program."

Still, the clock was ticking as a November deployment to Syria approached. And Kent didn't want to desert her unit.

"She wasn't going to avoid or run from or cry [over] a deployment," Kent said. But "she had a good deal of anxiety of being separated from our sons. It was mixed emotions. She was very happy and proud to deploy to Syria. But at the same time, there were late-night conversations about being separated from the boys."

A neighbor of the Kents was able to connect them with the office of Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., a longtime vocal opponent of the post-9/11 wars. Jones, who is now battling health issues and in hospice care, also fought for Kent and wrote Navy Secretary Richard Spencer on her behalf.

"I am writing to ask for consideration of a potential policy change about the use of 'initial entry' medical standards as opposed to 'retention' medical standards in respect to officer accessions," Jones wrote to Spencer shared with the Kents. "I think these practices may be discriminatory while prohibiting upward mobility and advancement opportunities."

Jones went on to ask in the letter whether it was possible to change the Navy policy to allow retention standards to be applied to enlisted personnel seeking entrance into officer programs.

On Tuesday, Jones' office, dealing with the lawmaker's failing health, declined to comment further.

Spencer responded to Jones' letter, Joe Kent said. In it, they learned the Navy would issue a policy that directed a more expansive waiver process, raising optimism that Kent might finally attend her program this year, her family said.

But while in Syria, Kent ran into new roadblocks. The Navy required a blood sample, which was nearly impossible to provide from a war zone, her family said.

In the meantime, she kept in touch with the family through FaceTime, phone calls, texts and emails.

The day before she died, Shannon saw her husband and children in a FaceTime call. It was the usual chaos trying to keep two rambunctious kids on the screen, Joe Kent said.

They texted and laughed about it afterward, he said. She also wrote she needed to get to bed because she had an early outing the next day and would text again that morning.

Joe Kent didn't know where his wife was going. They knew such sensitive details couldn't be shared.

"She basically said, 'I am going out this morning, I will text you back when I am back and safe,'" Joe Kent said. "And that was our last talk."

Stars and Stripes staff writers Corpus Christi Dickstein and Chad Garland contributed to this report.

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MILITARY

Marines: Suicides on upward trend

FROM FRONT PAGE

2017, according to the Defense Department.

The Marine Corps is typically a younger force than the other service branches, Marine Manpower and Reserve Affairs spokesman Maj. Craig Thomas wrote in an email to Stars and Stripes. About 63 percent of the Marines who died by suicide in 2018 were under the age of 25. While not all the Department of Defense Suicide Event Reports were finalized, most who committed suicide had not seen combat or been deployed overseas.

"Recent data represents a concerning upward trend in the number of deaths by suicide over the past three years," Thomas wrote. "The reason for the increase in suicides is very complex and there is no one root cause. The Marine Corps is working with Navy Bureau of Medicine, United States Marine Corps Health Services, sister services, and the Defense Suicide Prevention Office to identify ways to reduce the number of suicides."

Marine officials said the suicide data was accurate as of Jan. 8, but subject to change. They said the service felt confident only in its ability to track the Selected Reserve portion of Marine Reservists with "accuracy and reliability." Those members are considered to be in an active status.

The data released did not include demographic information.

Thomas said most Marines who die by suicide have no known history of seeking treatment for behavioral health.

"The Marine Corps uses a variety of sources to understand suicide-related behaviors," Thomas wrote.

The Marine Corps conducts continual surveillance of data related to suicide ideations, suicide attempts, and deaths by suicide. These data are used to inform suicide prevention initiatives including: policy and procedural guidance, social media campaigns, education on lethal means safety, and training for identifying and intervening on behalf of Marines with increased risk factors and warning signs."

News of the increase in suicides came within days of commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Robert Neller's "Message to the Force 2019," which was drafted Jan. 25, according to a copy provided to Stars and Stripes. In that document, Neller said he felt compelled to address the issue.

"No one goes through life without dealing with stress and pain, which is why we continue to resource and grow programs to address mental health and the growing problem of suicide, both within our active-duty Marines as well as our veterans; but we have to continue to do better," he wrote.

"We pride ourselves on building tough, resilient, mission-focused Marines; but we also pride ourselves on taking care of our own. If you need help, please ask/speak up ... we will be there for you."

Neller told Marines contemplating suicide to consider the residual impacts of such a decision on family, friends and members of their unit, "none of whom will ever truly recover."

"While there is no dishonor in coming up short or needing help, there is no honor in quitting," Neller wrote. "MARINES NEVER QUIT ON EACH OTHER! For those who are

struggling ... our Marine Corps, our families, and our Nation need you; we can't afford to lose you."

The increase in suicides is particularly alarming to Marine officials because of the Corps' extensive mental health service offerings, which include a multi-pronged approach of training, safe messaging practices and programs.

They said that training starts at the unit level and focuses on educating Marines on risk factors, warning signs, responsibilities for intervention, resiliency, coping, self-support skills, decision-making, peer intervention and intervention via social media.

They also work to identify at-risk individuals, provide them with services and monitor their progress. There are counselors and other services designed for prevention and intervention. An around-the-clock, Marine-specific crisis support line called the DSTRESS Line — 1-877-476-7734; www.dstressline.com — that allows Marines and attached sailors to remain anonymous in seeking help.

This year, the Marine Corps plans to participate in a pilot program called the Suicide Death Review Pilot, in collaboration with the Defense Suicide Prevention Office, Thomas wrote.

The program will study 10 suicide cases from 2018 and provide detailed analysis of each.

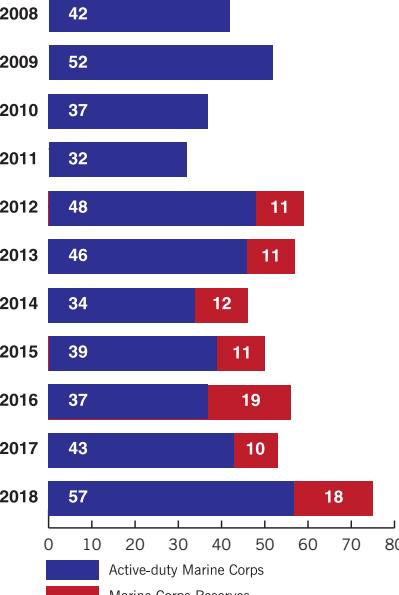
They are also revamping their Operational Stress Control and Readiness suicide prevention training.

Suicide determinations fall under the purview of the Armed Forces Medical Examiners System.

burke.matt@stripes.com

Marine Corps suicides hit a 10-year high

The chart reflects the number of verified and suspected suicides in the active-duty Marine Corps and Marine Corps Reserve. The annual data has only been collected since 2012 for the Reserve. The data is accurate as of Jan. 8, 2019, and is subject to change as the data is finalized.



SOURCE: U.S. Marine Corps

Court: 'Blue Water' Navy vets eligible for benefits

9-2 decision overturns previous ruling by Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

By NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A federal court ruled Tuesday that Vietnam veterans who served on ships offshore during the war are eligible for benefits to treat illnesses linked to exposure to the chemical herbicide Agent Orange — a decision that has the potential to extend help to thousands of veterans.

The Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit ruled 9-2 in favor of Alfred Procopio Jr., 73, who served on the USS Intrepid during the Vietnam War. Procopio is one of tens of thousands of "Blue Water" Navy veterans who served aboard aircraft carriers, destroyers and other ships and were deemed ineligible for the same disability benefits as those veterans who served on the ground and inland waterways.

The decision comes one decade after the Department of Veterans Affairs denied Procopio's disability claims for diabetes and prostate cancer. The court's ruling reverses a previous decision from the Court

"We're walking on air right now," Wells said. "We feel that the court listened to our arguments, read the briefs and came to a good, commonsense conclusion."

John Wells
attorney representing "Blue Water" Navy veterans

of Appeals for Veterans Claims, which upheld the denial because Procopio couldn't show direct exposure to Agent Orange.

"Mr. Procopio is entitled to a presumption of service connection for his prostate cancer and diabetes mellitus," the decision issued Tuesday states. "Accordingly, we reverse."

Judge Kimberly A. Moore, who wrote on behalf of the majority, added, "We find no merit in the government's arguments to the contrary."

At issue was interpretation of the current law, which allows easier access to disability benefits for veterans who "served in the Republic of Vietnam" and suffer from one of a list of illnesses linked to the Agent Orange. The herbicide has been found to cause respiratory cancers, Parkinson's

disease and heart disease, as well as other conditions.

The court determined territorial seas should be included in the definition of "Republic of Vietnam" — a point the government disputed.

For Procopio and other Blue Water Navy veterans, the decision could result in thousands of dollars of disability benefits each month. John Wells, one of the attorneys on the case, estimated 50,000 to 70,000 veterans who could now become eligible for benefits. Veterans affected by the ruling must still go through a VA evaluation to ensure they meet all of the eligibility criteria.

"We're walking on air right now," Wells said. "We feel that the court listened to our arguments, read the briefs and came to a good, commonsense conclusion."

The government could seek a review of the case from the U.S. Supreme Court. VA Press Secretary Curt Cashour said the VA is reviewing the decision and "will determine an appropriate response."

While pursuing Procopio's case, Wells and other advocates spearheaded efforts on Capitol Hill in recent years to extend benefits to Blue Water Navy veterans.

Congress failed to pass the legislation late last year during the final days in session. The bill stalled in the Senate after VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and several former VA secretaries came out against it. Wilkie cited high costs and insufficient scientific evidence linking Blue Water Navy veterans to Agent Orange exposure.

"We'd been dealing with Congress for eight years and were unable to get it through," Wells said. "We felt we had to work through the courts. It was a multifaceted approach."

The legislation was introduced again this month during the first days of the 116th Congress. Wells still sees a need for Congress to pass the bill in order for the veterans' eligibility to be written explicitly in law and not left up to future courts to interpret, he said.

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NATION

Trump: 'Wall' must be part of lawmakers' border deal

By ANDREW TAYLOR
AND ALAN FRAM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Capitol Hill negotiators are hopeful of an agreement as they officially kick off talks Wednesday on a homeland security spending bill stalled over funding for President Donald Trump's proposed border wall.

Left on their own, the seasoned House and Senate lawmakers say they could easily reach a border security deal as they have for two years in a row. But whether Trump would sign it is another matter altogether.

Trump tweeted Wednesday morning, hours before the negotiators were to sit down for their first meeting, that the group of Republicans and Democrats are "Wasting their time!" if they aren't "discussing or contemplating a Wall or Physical Barrier."

"He tweets and all you guys do

is spend your whole day following up on his tweets," said House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md. "In any event, our answer is the same. We're in negotiations. These I think are going to be good faith negotiations. And we want to reach an agreement. We want to make sure the government doesn't shut down again."

Democrats, who hold the House, remain united against Trump's vision for a massive wall project, yet some are signaling a willingness to deal in the wake of the 35-day partial government shutdown.

"We've consistently said that we do not support a medieval border wall from sea to shining sea," said Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y. "However, we are able to support fencing where it makes sense, but it should be done in an evidence-based fashion."

For their part, GOP leaders want to de-escalate the battle over the border wall and suggest

they too could be flexible as bargainers, who hold their first session Wednesday, seek a bipartisan agreement.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who pressured Trump last week to end the shutdown, warned the president against triggering another shutdown or declaring a national emergency on the Southwest boundary, a move that could let him redirect budget funds to building segments of the wall.

When asked to describe a border security agreement he'd support, McConnell said, "I'm for whatever tools that would prevent the level of dysfunction we've seen on full display here the last month and also doesn't bring about a view on the president's part that he needs to declare a national emergency."

But prospects for broadening the scope of the talks to include broader immigration issues such as providing protection against



DANIEL OCHOA DE OLZA/AP

A woman takes a photo by the border fence between San Diego, Calif., and Tijuana, as seen from Mexico, on Jan. 3. Lawmakers began talks Wednesday on a homeland security spending bill.

deportation to "Dreamer" immigrants brought illegally to the country as children — or even must-do legislation to increase the government's borrowing cap — appeared to be fading.

"I think this conference is going to be limited to the homeland security issues," said House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, D-N.Y.

A fresh, protracted crisis could

make it difficult to tackle other upcoming business such as a deal to prevent cuts to the Pentagon and domestic agencies.

The longest shutdown was initiated by Trump after Democrats refused his demand for \$5.7 billion to build segments of his border wall. Polls show people chiefly blame Trump and Republicans for the shutdown and widely dislike the wall.

House set to pass pay raise for civilian federal workers

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday was set to pass a pay raise for civilian federal employees in what Democrats are casting as both a necessity and a gesture of appreciation for a workforce reeling after a 35-day partial government shutdown.

The 2.6-percent raise is calibrated to match that given to military personnel in a 2019 spending bill passed last year. President Donald Trump subjected the rest of the federal workforce to a pay freeze in a Dec. 28 executive order, though Congress could override that at any time.

Before the shutdown began, Sen-

ate appropriators had agreed on a 1.9 percent raise for civilian employees in 2019 but that provision — along with the rest of a federal spending agreement — got caught up in the standoff over Trump's proposed southern border wall.

The ensuing shutdown caused 800,000 workers to have two paychecks delayed, and Rep. G. K. Butterfield, D-N.C., the author of the bill, said the pay raise is "not only deserved, but it's also symbolically important."

"After the shutdown, it's imperative that this body make a statement to the civilian workforce that it is respected, that their work does have dignity and we recognize that," he said Tuesday.

The bill is co-sponsored by every Washington-area House member, including Reps. Don Beyer and Jennifer Wexton of Virginia, as well as Reps. Anthony G. Brown, Jamie Raskin and David Trone of Maryland, and D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton. All are Democrats.

House Republicans on Tuesday criticized the bill for not having gotten a committee hearing or markup or a fiscal cost analysis from the Congressional Budget Office.

Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., the top Republican on the House Oversight and Reform subcommittee dealing with the federal workforce, said the cost of the

raise could reach \$50 billion.

"We've had a rush to put this thing on the floor, [which] would lead many of us to believe this is nothing but a messaging bill and is not serious about trying to make real reforms to the federal workforce," he said in a House Rules Committee meeting.

Five Senate Democrats on Tuesday introduced legislation instituting a 2.6 percent pay raise, matching the House bill. Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., said the increase over the previously negotiated 1.9 percent raise was justified "in light of the added costs imposed on federal workers by the shutdown."

"Now more than ever, they de-

serve this cost-of-living adjustment to help ends meet," he said.

Congressional aides said the pay raise will likely have to be settled as part of the ongoing spending negotiations.

Trump disputes intel chiefs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump lashed out at his intelligence chiefs Wednesday after they told Congress that North Korea is unlikely to dismantle its nuclear arsenal and that the Iran nuclear deal is working.

"Perhaps Intelligence should go back to school!" Trump tweeted.

At a hearing Tuesday, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats said intelligence information does not support the claim that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will eliminate his nuclear weapons.

Kim committed to denuclearization after meeting with Trump last year. A second Trump-Kim meeting is expected in February.

The U.S. intelligence agencies also said Iran continues to work with other parties to the nuclear

deal it reached with the U.S. and other world powers. In doing so, they said, it has at least temporarily lessened the nuclear threat. In May 2018, Trump withdrew the U.S. from that accord.

"The intelligence people seem to be extremely passive and naive when it comes to the dangers of Iran," Trump tweeted. "They are wrong!"

Mark Warner, of Virginia, the senior Democrat on the Senate's intelligence panel, expressed displeasure with Trump's comments.

"The President has a dangerous habit of undermining the intelligence community to fit his alternate reality," Warner tweeted. "People risk their lives for the intelligence he just tosses aside on Twitter."



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serve this cost-of-living adjustment to help ends meet," he said.

Congressional aides said the pay raise will likely have to be settled as part of the ongoing spending negotiations.

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NATION

Asylum-seekers now wait in Mexico

By ELLIOT SPAGAT
Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The Trump administration on Tuesday quietly launched an effort to make asylum-seekers wait in Mexico while their cases wind through U.S. immigration courts despite clear reservations and conflicting messages from the Mexican government.

The U.S. returned one asylum-seeker to Mexico — a Honduran man — on the first day of what would be one of the most dramatic changes to the U.S. immigration system of Donald Trump's presidency if the policy survives an anticipated legal challenge. Carlos Catarido Gomez, 55, arrived in Tijuana around midday and asked authorities for a ride to a migrant shelter.

Mexican officials sent mixed signals on the crucial point of whether Mexico would impose limits on accepting families. Tonatiuh Guillen, commissioner of Mexico's National Immigration Institute, said Mexico would accept only people 18 to 60 years old, which rules out families with young children.

But Roberto Velasco, spokesman for Mexico's foreign relations secretary, said Friday that families would be considered case by case. A Mexican official with direct knowledge of the process said Mexico requested that families be excluded from the policy but that the U.S. declined to make any commitment, conceding only to start with single adults. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the deliberations were not public.

The switch is limited to San Diego's San Ysidro border crossing, the nation's busiest, though Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan wrote in a memo released Tuesday that it is expected to extend to other crossings "in the near future." Adding to a sense of confusion, Guillen said Mexico will allow it at only the one crossing that connects San Diego and Tijuana.

Katie Waldman, a Department of Homeland Security spokeswoman, insisted families will



GREGORY BULL/AP

Carlos Catarido Gomez, center, of Honduras, is escorted by Mexican officials in Tijuana, Mexico, on Tuesday after leaving the U.S. as the first person returned to Mexico to wait for his asylum trial date.

be included. A sharp increase in Central American families seeking asylum in the U.S. led to the Trump administration's dramatic move, and limiting families would diminish the impact.

"It will be expanded across the entire Southwest border, and it will apply to family groups," Waldman said.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen was in San Diego on Tuesday to observe the launch but had no public appearances. The U.S. Embassy in Mexico said in a news release that the program began Tuesday.

Mexico's foreign relations secretary said Friday that the U.S. would start with 20 people a day. Two U.S. officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because the deliberations were not public said shortly before the launch that the policy would start with about 100 people a week in a trial period of up to 90 days in San Diego.

The launch followed months of delicate talks between the U.S. and Mexico and marked a change to the U.S. asylum system that both the administration and asylum experts said was unprecedented.

Velasco, writing Monday in an opinion column in The Washington Post, outlined Mexico's doubts and said there "are several technical-level questions ... that our two governments need to address to guarantee an adequate implementation of this unilateral policy." Mexico has repeatedly said the U.S. is acting alone, but it has pledged to issue temporary visas to the asylum-seekers, with permission to seek work authorization.

"The operational complexity of receiving asylum seekers from the United States opens the door to new potential drawbacks," Velasco wrote. "Mexico will keep raising these concerns

to the United States, to adequately manage the situation while guaranteeing the orderly functioning of our border."

On Monday, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services said in a memo to employees that asylum officers would interview migrants to determine if they are "more likely than not" to be persecuted or tortured in Mexico while waiting for hearings in the U.S. If they are not, they will be returned to Mexico. Asylum-seekers will not be allowed to have attorneys at that initial screening held at border crossings "given the limited capacity and resources," drawing criticism from immigration attorneys.

Nielsen said last week that the "migrant protection protocols" being introduced in San Diego are a "methodical commonsense" approach to what she calls a humanitarian and security crisis on the Mexican border.

Lawmakers press for a full Russia probe report

By MARY CLARE JALONICK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers appear increasingly nervous that Congress and the public won't see a full report when special counsel Robert Mueller is finished with his Russia probe, including what the investigation finds about President Donald Trump.

Republicans and Democrats say they support public disclosure of Mueller's findings. But it's unclear exactly what documentation will be produced at the end of the probe into possible coordination between Trump associates and Russia, and how much of that the Justice Department will allow people to see. Acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker said Monday that the probe is "close to being completed," the first official sign that Mueller's investigation may be wrapping up.

Democrats have pressured Trump's attorney general nominee, William Barr, on the full release of Mueller's final report. Lawmakers in both parties have maintained that there will have to be some sort of public resolution when the report is done — and privately hope that a report shows conclusions that are favorable to their own side.

The top three members of House Republican leadership — Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Louisiana Rep. Steve Scalise and Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney — said Tuesday that they would support the public release of a report produced from the Mueller investigation. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he would like any report to be "as fully open and transparent" as possible. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said he was going to call Barr to ask him about the possibility that key information could be shielded from disclosure through Justice Department regulations and White House claims of executive privilege.

The Judiciary Committee is scheduled to vote on Barr's nomination next week, and Democrats have said, they aren't satisfied with his commitment that he would be as transparent as possible under Justice Department regulations. The nominee said at his confirmation hearing that he envisions two reports, one that Mueller sends to him and another that he drafts for Congress.

Graham did say he would call Barr after Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., questioned whether "indictment worthy" acts by Trump could be left out of Mueller's report. Whitehouse pointed to a Justice Department regulation that the president can't be indicted, along with the possibility that the White House could assert executive privilege to prevent the disclosure of damaging information.

Whitehouse called that scenario "a ginormous loophole" in Barr's pledge of transparency.

Trump Organization vows to use E-Verify

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Trump Organization, responding to claims that some of its workers were in the U.S. illegally, said Wednesday that it will use the E-Verify electronic system at all of its properties to check employees' documentation.

A lawyer for a dozen immigrant workers at the Trump National Golf Club in New York's Westchester County said recently that they were fired on Jan. 18. He said many had worked there for a dozen or more years.

Workers at another Trump club in New Jersey came forward last month to allege managers there

had hired them knowing they were in the country illegally.

"We are actively engaged in uniforming this process across our properties and will institute E-verify at any property not currently utilizing this system," Eric Trump, executive vice president of The Trump Organization, said in a statement provided to The Associated Press. "As a company we take this obligation very seriously and when faced with a situation in which an employee has presented false and fraudulent documentation, we will take appropriate action."

"I must say, for me personally, this whole thing is really heart-breaking," he added. "Our em-

ployees are like family but when presented with fake documents, an employer has little choice."

Launched in 1996, the E-Verify system allows employers to check documentation submitted by job applicants with records at the Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration to see whether they are authorized to work.

During his presidential campaign, Republican Donald Trump called for all employers to use the federal government online E-Verify system. He told MSNBC in 2016 that he uses it at his properties, and that there should be a "huge financial penalty" for companies that hire undocumented

workers.

"This situation is not unique to Trump Organization — it is one that all companies face," said Eric Trump. "It demonstrates that our immigration system is severely broken and needs to be fixed immediately. It is my greatest hope that our 'lawmakers' return to work and actually do their jobs."

President Trump turned over day-to-day management of his business to Eric and his other adult son, Donald Jr., when he took the oath of office two years ago.

The Trump Organization owns or manages 17 golf clubs around the world.

NATION



BEN MARGOT/AP

Pacific Gas & Electric in California filed for bankruptcy protection Tuesday, citing hundreds of lawsuits over fires in 2017 and 2018 and tens of billions of dollars in potential liability.

PG&E bankruptcy could be costly to consumers, victims of wildfire

BY SUDHIN THANAWALA
AND CATHY BUSSEWITZ
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Faced with potentially ruinous lawsuits over California's wildfires, Pacific Gas & Electric Corp. filed for bankruptcy protection Tuesday, a move that could lead to higher bills for customers and reduce payouts to fire victims.

The Chapter 11 filing allows PG&E, the nation's largest utility, to continue operating while it puts its books in order. But it was seen as a glimpse of the financial toll that could lie ahead for the industry because of climate change, which scientists say is leading to fiercer, more destructive blazes and longer fire seasons.

The bankruptcy could also jeopardize California's ambitious program to switch entirely to renewable energy sources within a few decades.

PG&E, which supplies natural gas and electricity to 16 million people in Northern

and central California, cited hundreds of lawsuits over fires in 2017 and 2018 and tens of billions of dollars in potential liability when it announced earlier this month that it planned to file for bankruptcy.

The blazes include the nation's deadliest wildfire in a century — the one in November that killed at least 86 people and destroyed 15,000 homes in and around the Northern California town of Paradise. The cause is still under investigation, but suspicion fell on PG&E after it reported power line problems nearby around the time the fire broke out.

Last week, however, state investigators determined that the company's equipment was not to blame for a 2017 fire that killed 22 people and destroyed more than 5,600 buildings in Northern California wine country. That finding spared PG&E from billions in liability.

PG&E said the bankruptcy will not affect electric or gas service and will allow

for an "orderly, fair and expeditious resolution" of wildfire claims.

The wildfire lawsuits accuse PG&E of inadequate maintenance, including not adequately trimming trees and clearing brush around electrical lines, and failing to shut off power when fire risk is high.

The filing immediately puts the lawsuits on hold and consolidates them in bankruptcy court, where legal experts say victims will probably receive less money.

"They're going to have to take some sort of haircut on their claims," said Jared Elias, a bankruptcy attorney who teaches at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law. "We don't know yet what that will be."

In a bankruptcy proceeding, the victims will have little chance of getting punitive damages, and their claims will almost certainly be heard by a judge, not a jury. They will also have to stand in line behind PG&E's secured creditors, such as banks.

Woman dies after falling on stairs of NYC subway

BY KAREN MATTHEWS
Associated Press

NEW YORK — A young mother died after falling down stairs at a Manhattan subway station while holding her 1-year-old daughter.

Malaysia Goodman, of Stamford, Conn., fell down the stairs at a midtown Manhattan station around 8 p.m. Monday, police said.

Goodman was unconscious when police arrived. She was taken to a hospital, where she was pronounced dead. Her child was unharmed.

Police said it's unknown whether the child was in a stroller during the incident, as initially reported by authorities.

"I wish I could have helped her," Goodman's Shawn Goodman, 23, told The New York Times. He said his sister was a protective, caring mother.

It was not immediately clear whether the 22-year-old Goodman had a medical issue that precipitated her death or whether she died from impact. The city's medical examiner will determine the cause of death.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which also is investigating, called Goodman's death "a heartbreaking tragedy."

Only about a quarter of New York City's 472 subway stations have elevators, and the elevators that do exist are often out of service. Parents and caregivers who ride the subways with young children become adept at carrying a stroller and child up and down the stairs. Bystanders will often offer to help, but not always.

Shams Tarek, an MTA spokesman, said the Seventh Avenue B-D-E station where Goodman fell does have escalators. Parents are generally advised not to ride escalators with strollers, however.

The lack of elevators makes it difficult for people in wheelchairs to use New York's subway system, and disability-rights activists have staged frequent protests over the issue.

Andy Byford, who was appointed the MTA's head of the subway system last year after running the Toronto Transit Commission, has set a goal of adding enough elevators to the system that after five years, no rider will be more than two stops away from an accessible station.

Mosby: Baltimore to stop prosecuting marijuana possession

BY TIM PRUDENTE
The Baltimore Sun

BALTIMORE — Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby announced Tuesday her office would cease prosecuting people for possessing marijuana regardless of the quantity or the person's criminal history.

Calling the move monumental for justice in Baltimore, Mosby also requested the courts vacate convictions in nearly 5,000 cases of marijuana possession.

"When I ask myself, is the enforcement and prosecution of marijuana possession making us safer as a city, the answer is emphatically 'no,'" Mosby said.

Mosby follows district attorneys in Manhattan and Philadelphia who have scaled back or outright ended marijuana prosecutions. Maryland lawmakers decriminalized possession of up to 10 grams of marijuana in 2014.

But she also stood alone, politically. No police and no other city officials joined her at the announcement.

Hours later, Mayor Catherine Pugh announced her support for what "Mosby is attempting to address, namely the unnecessary criminalization of those who possess marijuana merely for personal use."

"But at the same time, we also need to understand that those who deal il-

legal substances fuel criminality in our neighborhoods which leads to violence."

Mosby aims to formalize marijuana policies already in practice. A report released Tuesday by her office shows city prosecutors dropped 88 percent of marijuana possession cases in Baltimore District Court since 2014 — 1,001 cases.

Still, convictions have saddled thousands in Baltimore with criminal records and frustrated their job searches, Mosby said.

The marijuana arrests have disproportionately affected minority neighborhoods in Baltimore.



STEVE RUARK/AP
Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby, right, said she will not prosecute marijuana possession cases.

WORLD

Maduro offers to negotiate with opposition

Venezuelan president also warns US against new 'Vietnam' in Latin America

BY ANDREINA APONTE,
RACHELLE KRYGIER
AND ANTHONY FAIOLA
The Washington Post

CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro offered dialogue to the increasingly vigorous opposition Wednesday while warning the American people that intervening in his country could create a new Vietnam-style quagmire.

The dialogue offer, which has been made before, was immediately praised by Russia and drew a tweet from President Donald Trump, who said it came after increased US pressure on the Venezuelan government and economy. "I am ready to sit down at the negotiating table with the opposition so that we could talk about what benefits Venezuela," Maduro said in an interview with Russian state media. He added that letters have been sent to the governments of Mexico, Uruguay, Bolivia, Russia, the Vatican and other European states to involve them in the process.

At the same time, he issued a video message directed at the American people, warning them that the Trump administration was trying to carry out a coup d'état in Venezuela that he said would be disastrous.

"We will not allow a Vietnam in Latin America," he said. "They want to put their hands on our oil like they did in Iraq, like they did in Libya," Maduro added, referring to the United States.

"I ask for the support of people of the United States so that there is not a new Vietnam," Maduro said in the video posted on Facebook.

Russia, which has been Maduro's most vocal international supporter, praised his willingness to negotiate with the US-backed opposition, the Kremlin said Wednesday.

"The fact that President Maduro is open to dialogue with the opposition deserves high praise and is commendable," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters in a phone call.

In an early morning tweet soon afterward, Trump seemed to suggest that Maduro's offer for dialogue was prompted by "US sanctions and the cutting off of oil revenue."

Despite the offer for dialogue, authorities ratcheted up pressure on the opposition with a request by Tarek Saab, the chief prosecutor, to freeze opposition leader

Juan Guaidó's assets. The request was later ratified by the loyalist Supreme Court as a preventive measure pending a full investigation. The move stopped short of a detention order — something the Trump administration has strongly warned against.

Speaking at the opposition-led National Assembly, which he heads, Guaidó responded to the move by dismissing it as "nothing new under the sun." He said it

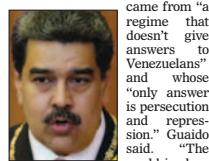
came from "a regime that doesn't give answers to Venezuelans" and whose "only answer is persecution and repression," Guaidó said. "The world is clear on what's happening in Venezuela. Let's not desist because of threats or persecution."

The United States, which backs Guaidó as the legitimate leader of Venezuela, pushed back against the chief prosecutor's effort.

"We denounce the illegitimate former Venezuelan Attorney General's threats against President Juan Guaidó," White House national security adviser John Bolton wrote on Twitter. "Let me reiterate: there will be serious consequences for those who attempt to subvert democracy and harm Guaidó."

The chief prosecutor's request came after the United States escalated its efforts to unseat the leftist Maduro on Monday by punishing the state oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., in an effort to transfer its control to the opposition. The US move freezes \$7 billion in US-based assets and blocks more than \$11 billion in revenue that Venezuela would get from oil sales next year through its US-based company Cito, which owns three refineries in the United States and employs thousands of workers.

In addition, searches were carried out at other residences in northern and southwestern Germany of people linked to the



I ask for the support of people of the United States so that there is not a new Vietnam.

Nicolas Maduro
Venezuelan president



LEO CORREA/AP

Hayo, chief of the Pataxo Ha-hae indigenous community, stands over the Paraopeba River on a bridge near his village in Brumadinho, Brazil, on Tuesday. Muddy mining waste released by a dam breach has turned the waters brown.

Waste unleashed in Brazil's dam breach heads toward larger river

BY DIANE JEANTET

Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO — A torrent of muddy mining waste unleashed by a dam breach that killed at least 84 people in southeastern Brazil is now heading down a small river with high concentrations of iron oxide, threatening to contaminate a much larger river that provides drinking water to communities in five of the country's 26 states.

The release of the muddy waste has turned the normally greenish water of the Paraopeba River brown about 11 miles downstream from the southeastern city of Brumadinho, where the broken dam is.

The chief of an indigenous community said Tuesday that Brazilian environmental agents warned his community to stop fishing in the river, bathing in it and using its water for the plants they cultivate as food.

The Paraopeba flows into the much larger São Francisco River, which provides drinking and irrigation water to hundreds of municipalities and larger cities.

As grieving relatives of the dead bury family members and searchers continue looking for 276 people who are missing, Brazilian authorities and companies involved with river water management are trying to figure out how to prevent the contamination.

Their main focus is the Retiro Baixo hydroelectric

dam and plant complex about 186 miles from Brumadinho. Officials and environmentalists hope the dam's reservoirs can be used to isolate the muck so it can be cleaned before that water is released to head farther downstream to the São Francisco River.

"A lot of communities and cities in different states depend on that river to live," said Carlos Ritti, a director at Brazil's Climate Observatory environmental nonprofit group.

The "wave" of muddy water and waste is expected to reach the dam between Feb. 5 and Feb. 10, Brazil's National Water Agency has said. Researchers from the Geological Survey of Brazil are monitoring the velocity of the mine waste and the estimate could change.

Technicians for Furnas, the company that operates the Retiro Baixo dam, are monitoring the sludge moving toward the plant and its density and have concluded it poses no structural risk to the dam, the company said in a statement.

The reddish-brown mud is moving at about 0.6 mph and is destroying vegetation and aquatic life, according to the Geological Survey of Brazil.

It was unleashed Friday when the dam storing iron ore waste for big Brazilian mining company Vale SA breached. Officials warned Tuesday that the death toll was expected to rise significantly, with no one rescued alive since Saturday.

German police arrest 3 suspected of bomb plot

Associated Press

BERLIN — German authorities arrested three suspected Islamic extremists Wednesday on allegations they were planning a bombing attack, and searched properties in three states in connection with their investigation.

Federal prosecutors said Iraiqi Shahin F. and Hersh F., both 23, and Rauf S., 36, were taken into custody in an early morning raid by a police SWAT team in the area of Dithmarschen, near the border with Denmark.

"We believe that Shahin F. and Hersh F. were firmly committed to carrying out an attack," she told reporters. "But (...) according to our information the concrete target and timing of the attack

three main suspects but not curiously to the bomb plot.

The two younger men are suspected of preparing a bomb attack and violating weapons laws, and Rauf S. is alleged to have aided them. Their last names were not given in line with German privacy laws.

The men appear to have been in the early stages of planning, said Frauke Koehler, a spokeswoman for the Federal Prosecutors Office.

"We believe that Shahin F. and Hersh F. were firmly committed to carrying out an attack," she told reporters. "But (...) according to our information the concrete target and timing of the attack

weren't determined yet."

Prosecutors allege the two men decided in late 2018 to "carry out an attack motivated by Islamic extremism in Germany." There are indications that they sympathized with Islamic State, but Koehler said there was no evidence so far the men were members of, or directed by, the extremist group.

Shahin F. is alleged to have contacted Walid Khaled Y.Y., also an Iraqi, who offered them a Russian semi-automatic Makarov 9mm pistol, prosecutors said. But the seller wanted at least \$1,370 for the weapon, which was considered too expensive so it wasn't purchased.

WORLD

Expectations low for US-China trade talks

By PAUL WISEMAN
AND CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. and Chinese negotiators started two days of high-level talks Wednesday aimed at settling a six-month trade war that has weakened both sides, shaken financial markets and clouded the outlook for the global economy.

Yet the odds seem stacked against any substantive resolution this week to the standoff between the world's two biggest economies. Perhaps the best that might be hoped for, analysts say, is for the two sides to agree to keep talking.

The differences between Beijing and Washington are vast. The United States is essentially demanding that China downsize its economic aspiration to be-

come a supreme world leader in such fields as robotics and electric cars.

"A comprehensive deal that fundamentally changes their system

I don't think that's possible," said Christopher Adams, a former U.S. trade official specializing in China and now a senior adviser at the law firm Covington.

Earlier negotiations flamed out. This time President Donald Trump might be inclined to drive an especially hard bargain after being forced to come in a dispute with congressional Democrats that partially shut the federal government for 35 days.

Moreover, a new complication injected itself into U.S.-China relations on the eve of the talks when the Justice Department brought criminal charges Monday against the Chinese tech giant Huawei,

accusing it of stealing technology secrets and violating sanctions against Iran. Beijing shot back by demanding that the Trump administration pull back from what it called an "unreasonable crack-down" on the Chinese maker of smartphones and telecom gear.

"We are anticipating no big outcomes this week," said Erin Ennis, senior vice president at the U.S.-China Business Council.

A deadline looms. On March 2, the Trump administration is scheduled to escalate its tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese imports from 10 percent to 25 percent.

The American delegation to this week's talks is led by Trade Representative Robert Lightizer, a longtime critic of aggressive Chinese trade practices and of U.S. policies that failed to blunt them. Heading the Chinese team

is Vice Premier Liu He.

The core of the U.S. allegations against China is that Beijing systematically steals trade secrets, forces foreign companies to hand over technology as the price of access to the Chinese market and subsidizes its own tech companies. But compelling China to reform its trade policies and treatment of foreign companies will be difficult.

"The idea of just grabbing technology however can is kind of ingrained at this point," said Amanda DeBusk, chair of the international trade practice at Dechert LLP and a former Commerce Department official. "You can't just flip a switch" and expect China to drop long-established practices.

The administration has imposed tariffs on \$250 billion in Chinese imports; Beijing has re-

taliated with import taxes on \$110 billion in U.S. goods.

Trump has threatened to extend the tariffs to an additional \$267 billion in Chinese goods. If he did, Trump's import taxes would cover virtually everything China ships to the United States.

Last spring, it looked as if the two sides might avoid a full-blown conflict. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin declared the trade war "on hold" after China had agreed to step up its purchases of U.S. goods, especially in agriculture and energy, and narrow America's huge trade deficit with China.

The cease-fire didn't last. Critics dismissed Beijing's commitments as vague, and Trump backed away from Mnuchin's deal and proceeded with tariffs.



BEE JAE-MAN, YONHAP/AP

South Korean President Moon Jae-in places a flower at a memorial altar for the late former sex slave and activist Kim Bok-dong on Wednesday in Seoul, South Korea.

S. Korea mourns death of wartime sex slave

By KIM TONG-HYUNG
Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — A South Korean woman who was forced as a girl into a brothel and sexually enslaved by the Japanese military during World War II was mourned Wednesday by hundreds of protesters who demanded reparations from Tokyo over wartime atrocities.

Kim Bok-dong had been a vocal leader at the rallies that have been held every Wednesday in Seoul for nearly 30 years. She died Monday at a Seoul hospital where she had been receiving treatment for cancer. She was 92.

On a street near where the Japanese Embassy used to be, protesters gathered around a bronze statue of a girl representing Korean sexual slavery victims and held a moment of silence for Kim. Many of them held signsboards with Kim's photos and words including, "We will never forget the life of Kim Bok-dong" and "Japanese government, apologize!"

Kim was one of the first victims to speak out and break decades of silence

over Japan's wartime sexual slavery that experts say forced thousands of Asian women into front-line brothels. She traveled around the world testifying about her experience, including at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 and at a U.N. Human Rights Council panel in 2016. Of the 239 Korean women who have come forward as victims, only 23 are still alive.

"We do not have much time left to spend with them," said Lee Seong-rim, one of the protesters, who said it would be "miraculous" if the Japanese government ever fully acknowledges accountability over the sexual slavery of Korean women.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who visited an altar set up for Kim at a Seoul hospital on Tuesday, said in a statement that Kim devoted her life to "restoring human dignity" and that her campaigning gave South Koreans a "bravery to face the truth."

According to Yoon Meehyang, who heads an activist group representing South Korean victims of Japan, Kim was dragged away from home at the age of 14

and forced to have sex with Japanese soldiers at military brothels in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore from 1940 to 1945. She came forward as a victim in 1992, a year after Kim Hak-sun became the first South Korean woman to identify herself as a former sex slave.

"I am a victim of the Japanese military's comfort women system and I stand in front of the Japanese embassy every Wednesday fighting for the restoration of our honor and dignity, but I also know too well the pain of women all around the world who are currently suffering from wartime sexual violence," Kim Bok-dong said in 2012 as she launched the "Butterfly Fund" for helping victims of wartime sexual abuse with another former Korean sex slave, Gil Won-ok.

A 1991-93 Japanese government investigation concluded that many of the women were recruited against their will, leading to a landmark Japanese apology. The investigation found no written proof in official documents, however, and conservatives in Japan have cited that in arguing the women were not coerced.

Brexit envoy insists EU is united in deal

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Top European Union Brexit officials insisted Wednesday that the EU's divorce agreement with Britain cannot be renegotiated as Prime Minister Theresa May prepares to seek fresh concessions from the bloc just weeks before her country is set to leave.

"The EU institutions remain united, and we stand by the agreement that we have negotiated with the U.K.," Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier told reporters as he left a meeting of the European Parliament's Brexit committee.

Britain is scheduled to exit the EU on March 29 — the first country ever to do so — but an agreement governing its departure is held up in the British Parliament, mostly due to a border known as the Irish "backstop."

The safeguard mechanism would keep the U.K. in a customs union with the EU in order to remove the need for checks along the border between the U.K.'s Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland after Britain leaves the bloc. The border area was once a flashpoint during decades of conflict that costs thousands of lives.

Many British lawmakers fear the backstop will trap Britain in regulatory lockstep with the EU, and Parliament earlier rejected the Brexit withdrawal agreement May sealed in November with the EU.

On Tuesday, May won backing from Parliament to reopen negotiations over the withdrawal deal — but EU leaders reiterated Wednesday that the deal cannot be changed.

The EU parliament point-man on Brexit, Guy Verhofstadt, underlined that nobody in Europe wants to use the backstop but that it's "needed to be 100 percent sure that there is no border between Northern Ireland and the Irish republic."

Verhofstadt said the only way for May to win concessions would be to back away from her long-held stance that Britain must not remain part of the EU's customs area after it leaves except during a transition phase of about two years after March 29 to help ease the country out.

"If the future relationship is, for example, a customs union, that makes it completely different," Verhofstadt told reporters.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

911 dispatcher helps boy with homework

IN LAFAYETTE — Police dispatchers are trained to deal with a number of situations, and a dispatcher in Indiana had to know her numbers when a boy called 911 seeking help with his homework.

Lafayette Police dispatcher Antonia Bundy answered the call from the boy, who said he had "a bad day at school." It seemed the boy had "tons of homework" before the dispatcher narrowed down that he was having trouble with fractions.

An audio recording of the call posted on Twitter shows how the dispatcher helped the child solve the equation: three-fourths plus one-fourth.

Police said they don't recommend calling 911 for homework help.

Police: Man pushed his face into buttocks

NC KERNERSVILLE — Authorities have accused a North Carolina man of pushing his face into the buttocks of three women in public.

The Winston-Salem Journal reported Kernesville police said Stefan Ryan Shuford, 25, was charged with three counts of sexual battery and three counts of assault on a female on the town's main street.

A magistrate said Shuford was charged in a similar case two weeks ago and was released on bail.

After his arrest Friday, police said they had received many reports of a man inappropriately touching women.

Woman rescued after 3 days in elevator

NY NEW YORK — Police said a woman was rescued after being stuck for three days in the private elevator of a Manhattan townhouse owned by a billionaire investment banker from Arkansas.

A police spokesman said the woman, 53, was in stable condition Monday at a hospital. The woman is a family employee.

Authorities responded to a 911 call from the home on East 65th Street, near Central Park. Firefighters freed the woman after forcing entry into the elevator.

The luxury townhouse is owned by Warren A. Stephens and his wife, Harriet.

Woman stops bus after driver dies

NH NASHUA — A passenger in New Hampshire said she jumped into action to stop an out-of-control bus after the driver suffered a fatal medical emergency.

Lizette Markham said she was riding the Nashua Transit System bus Monday morning when it struck a fire hydrant and a parked car.

Markham said she noticed the driver was slumped over, so she rushed to the front of the bus and held her foot on the brake until first responders arrived.

THE CENSUS

3K

The approximate number of red hats that will be handed out to babies born in Indiana in February courtesy of the American Heart Association's "Little Hats, Big Hearts" program. Heart Association staff members were delivering the hats to more than 30 hospitals across the state this week. The hats were knitted or crocheted by more than 200 volunteers. February is American Heart Month, and Feb. 7-14 is Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Week.



HUGH CAREY, (FRISCO, COLO.) SUMMIT DAILY NEWS/AP

Customized transportation

Breckenridge, Colo., resident John Cutroneo commutes home from the grocery store following a day of skiing at a resort Tuesday in the Valley Brook neighborhood. Cutroneo custom-made his fat-tire bike to carry the skis to avoid traffic and parking in town.

The driver has not been identified, and his cause of death has not been released.

Wrong-way driver charged with DUI

CT NORWICH — Authorities said a Nebraska man who drove 17 miles in the wrong direction on a highway in Connecticut was charged with driving while intoxicated.

State police said officials received numerous 911 calls Saturday reporting that an SUV was traveling south in the northbound lane on I-395 in the town of Plainfield.

Officials said the SUV narrowly missed multiple police vehicles before officers could deploy stop sticks to deflate three of its tires. The driver kept going, but police eventually stopped and arrested him.

Police said Kory Langan, 37, of Columbus, was also charged with reckless driving and other offenses.

Suspect who hopped on moving semi arrested

CA FRESNO — Police in central California arrested a carjacking suspect caught on video escaping by jumping on the side of a moving semi-truck.

Officials said the man grabbed a woman's keys as she pumped gas Jan. 9 in southeast Fresno. The woman fought the suspect as he tried to get into her car and he ran from the scene.

A bystander recorded cell-phone video of the suspect climbing on the cab of a truck as it drove away.

The Fresno Bee reported Saturday that Bryan McCarter, 59, was arrested Jan. 21 without incident.

30-year-old orca dies at Orlando park

FL ORLANDO — Officials at SeaWorld's Orlando park said Kayla, a 30-year-old

orca, died after a brief illness.

SeaWorld officials said a cause of death won't be known until a post-mortem examination is conducted.

Kayla began showing signs of discomfort on Saturday, and veterinarians began treating her based on what they found from a physical exam.

Park officials said her condition worsened on Sunday and she was given around-the-clock care until her death.

Kayla was among the last orcas at SeaWorld's Orlando park as well as at parks in California and Texas.

Hundreds of bats find way into high school

LA GUEYDAN — Hundreds of bats have made their way into a Louisiana high school.

News outlets reported that Vermilion Parish Schools Superintendent Jerome Puyan said Gueydan High School was closed

Monday and Tuesday.

Puyan said they had 600 bats flying around the hallways. He said the animals may have found their way into the school through a vent or some other opening.

School officials were advised to let the animals leave naturally Monday night before closing any openings around the building.

Jewelry store thief went in through ceiling

NY NEW YORK — Authorities said a thief who cleaned out practically all of the merchandise in a jewelry store grabbed the haul after going in through the ceiling.

Police said the thief went into Shlomi Jewelry in Queens through the ceiling and then cut all the wires to the surveillance equipment.

The store owner said almost all of the inventory was taken and put the loss at more than \$1 million.

From wire reports

FACES

Acting royalty

'Kid Who Would Be King' star Serkis has father, other relatives in show biz



BY SANDIE ANGULO CHEN
Special to The Washington Post

Acting is an inherited trait for 14-year-old Louis (pronounced "LU-ee") Ashbourne Serkis, the star of the modern-day Arthurian-legends adventure "The Kid Who Would Be King."

Not only is Louis' father, Andy Serkis, an award-winning actor (Klaue in "Black Panther," Gollum in "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy and Snoke in "The Last Jedi"), but his mother, aunt and older siblings act as well.

"I grew up on film sets, like as a baby on 'King Kong,'" the actor told The Washington Post. "I started to realize when I was 6 or 7 that it would be quite cool to entertain people for a living."

At that point the young Londoner "just got into it," booking auditions and early roles, the first of which was a bit part in 2015's grown-up mystery drama "Child 44."

"I did my first small thing when I was 7, but it was tiny," he recalled. "I played Gary Oldman's son, but my part got cut out of the film."

Since that first edited-out performance, Louis has racked up nine film and television credits, a mix of live-action, animated and motion-capture work (an art form his father is famous for perfecting). But when it came to securing his leading role in "The Kid Who Would Be King," Louis wasn't even sure what the movie was about initially.

"I was walking home from school, and my mom rang me and said, 'You've got to come home now; you have this audition,'" he said. "I didn't know anything about it, and I did my first audition in my sports (uniform)."



Louis Ashbourne Serkis, right, stars in "The Kid Who Would Be King," also co-starring Dean Chaumoo.

Twenty-first Century Fox

'Project Runway' returns bringing twists, more cash

Associated Press

"Project Runway" is going home, back to its original network with several new twists.

The biggest change is new host and executive producer Karlie Kloss, who takes over from the departed Heidi Klum and Tim Gunn when the show debuts March 14 on Bravo. The model grew up in St. Louis watching the original version.

Christian Siriano, who won Season 4, mentors the aspiring designers. Designer Brandon Maxwell, Elaine Welteroth and original cast member Nina Garcia serve as judges.

The winning designer will receive \$250,000 — a boost from \$100,000.

Klum and Gunn jumped to Amazon to start a rival show. Before leaving, Klum suggested Siriano as Gunn's successor.

Siriano noted the biggest difference between him and Gunn is that Gunn wasn't a designer; he was on the faculty at Parsons The New School of Design.

"When the designers have a red carpet challenge, I can actually give them real feedback because I just dress people at the Golden Globes the week before," Siriano said. "I'm giving them almost, like, real fashion industry feedback. And I think that it can, hopefully, only help them."

Models on the show will be diverse in their ethnicity and size ranges.

Viewers can vote for their favorite design in an episode and then that look will be available to buy at the network's website. If the judges' favorite look is different than the viewers' choice, it also will be for sale. Contestants whose designs are sold will receive a cut, according to producers.

Grammy-winning singer/songwriter James Ingram dies at 66

From wire reports

Grammy-winning singer and songwriter James Ingram, who topped the charts with hits like "Baby, Come to Me" and "Somewhere Out There," has died, according to his close friend, actress Debbie Allen. The musician was 66.

"I have lost my dearest friend and creative partner James Ingram to the Celestial Choir," Allen wrote on Twitter. "He will always be cherished, loved and remembered for his genius, his love of family and his humanity. I am blessed to have been so close. We will forever speak his name."

TMZ reports Ingram died after a battle with brain cancer.

Ingram was nominated for a whopping 14 Grammys and took home two trophies throughout his decades-long career, which started when he left his hometown of Akron, Ohio, for Los Angeles at just 18 with his band Revelation Funk.

The group soon disbanded, but Ingram stuck around in Hollywood, singing and playing piano in sessions with Ray Charles and recording vocals for Marvin Gaye.



Ingram

Ingram's career took off in 1981 when the legendary Quincy Jones included his song "Just Once" on his album "The Dude."

Maroon 5 cancels Super Bowl halftime news conference

Maroon 5 has canceled its news conference to discuss the band's Super Bowl half-time performance, choosing to not meet with reporters as most acts have done.

The NFL announced Tuesday that "the artists will let their show do the talking as they prepare to take the stage this Sunday."

Maroon 5, with frontman Adam Levine, will be joined by former Outkast member Big Boi and Houston rapper Travis Scott at halftime of the game between the Los Angeles Rams and New England Patriots. The NFL says instead of a news conference with the performers, it will use media platforms to show behind-the-scenes footage and content.

While Maroon 5 did not give a reason for its decision, it comes as some entertainers have said social injustice needs to be addressed during the Super Bowl.

That has led to some criticism of performers who are holding events in Atlanta.

ta. Jermaine Dupri said he was called a "sellout" for hosting a Super Bowl-related event during a meeting with people who had lost family members as result of police brutality.

Former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick helped start a wave of protests by kneeling during the national anthem to raise awareness to police brutality, racial inequality and other social issues.

Peter Jackson making new documentary of Beatles

Director Peter Jackson is making a new documentary using never-before-seen footage of the Beatles in the studio.

The acclaimed "Lord of the Rings" director said Wednesday the film will be based on roughly 55 hours of footage of the band working on songs in the studio in January 1969.

"It's like a time machine transports us back to 1969, and we get to sit in the studio watching these four friends make great music together," he says.

The film is being made with the cooperation of Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Yoko Ono and Olivia Harrison, the widows of John Lennon and George Harrison.

Other news

■ Actor, producer and director Bryce Dallas Howard has been named 2019 Woman of the Year by Harvard University's Hasty Pudding Theatricals. The nation's oldest collegiate theatrical organization announced Tuesday that Howard is "an accomplished actress who has given such a wide range of critically acclaimed performances, and is committed to expanding the role of women in every aspect of storytelling." Howard starred in "Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom" last year and will next be seen in "Rocketman," an Elton John biopic scheduled for release in May.

■ Christina Aguilera is joining the growing number of musicians launching residencies in Las Vegas. The singer announced Tuesday that "Christina Aguilera: The Xperience" will open at Zappos Theater at Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino on May 31. Aguilera announced 16 performances.

■ Singer-songwriter Alanis Morissette has allowed songs from her 1995 breakthrough album "Jagged Little Pill" to be used in a new Broadway musical. It's directed by Diane Paulus and has an original story by Diablo Cody.

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The Daily Guide to Navigating the European Business Market



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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Top 25 roundup

Virginia outlasts NC State in OT

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The misakes kept piling up for third-ranked Virginia, which was careless with the ball, struggled on the offensive glass and squandered a double-figure lead in the second half.

Fortunately for coach Tony Bennett, the Cavaliers still managed to squeeze out a road win against a ranked opponent. Kyle Guy hit the go-ahead three-pointer with two minutes left in overtime and Virginia held on to the horn to beat No. 23 North Carolina 66-65 on Tuesday night.

"We'll live and learn," Bennett said. "Fortunate to get out of here."

Indeed, Virginia (19-1, 7-1 Atlantic Coast Conference) went from controlling the game's flow in a hostile environment to building a 14-point lead and then having De'Andre Hunter improbably foul N.C. State's Markell Johnson on a forced-up 3-pointer for the tie in the final seconds of overtime.

Johnson — who had hit two free throws with 29.7 seconds left in regulation to force overtime — missed the first free throw, made the second and then sank the third while apparently trying to miss. Ty Jerome then inbounded the ball to Guy, who flung it to the other end of the court as time expired.

"It was a feeling of relief," Guy said. "That was a bad game on our part. Coach was rightfully mad after the game and got after us, because we did not play anywhere near our standard. And he holds us to a high standard, so we know we didn't play very well."

Of course, as Bennett and Guy noted, the Wolfpack (16-5, 4-4) had plenty to do with that, too.

Virginia came in ranked No. 1 nationally in KenPom's turnover percentage rate (13.5 percent), but matched its season high with 16 turnovers on 67 possessions (23.9 percent) — with one of those being a 10-second violation.

N.C. State also grabbed 16 offensive rebounds, the most allowed by the Cavaliers all season, and rallied despite shooting just 34 percent.

"There's no moral victories," said Devon Daniels, who had 10 points for the Wolfpack. "But that just tells us we're right there. If we can clean up a few things ... we can win the game."

No. 1 Tennessee 92, South Carolina 70: Admiral Schofield had 20 of his 24 points in the second half to lead the visiting Vols to their school record-tying 15th straight victory.

Grant Williams added 23 points for Tennessee (19-1, 7-0 Southeastern Conference), which saw a double-digit lead cut to 60-58 with 13 minutes to play. Jordan Bone

then scored five straight points to start an 18-6 run over the next six minutes that helped Tennessee stay perfect in SEC play.

Tennessee matched its program-best winning streak, which began in January 1915 and lasted through February 1917.

Chris Silva had 28 points — only six the second half — and 10 rebounds for South Carolina, which fell to 1-13 all time against No. 1 opponents.

No. 5 Michigan 65, Ohio State 49: Xavier Simpson had 11 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds, and the host Wolverines handed the Buckeyes their sixth loss in seven games.

Jordan Poole scored 15 points for Michigan (20-1, 9-1 Big Ten), which led by six at halftime and kept Ohio State (13-7, 3-6) frustrated after that.

The Buckeyes' chances of an upset in Ann Arbor were done in by their 19 turnovers.

Kaleb Wesson led the Buckeyes with 12 points.

No. 7 Kentucky 87, Vanderbilt 52: P.J. Washington had a double-double by halftime and finished with 26 points and 12 rebounds as the visiting Wildcats routed the Commodores and earned their seventh straight victory.

Kentucky (17-3, 6-1 Southeastern Conference) won its sixth straight in this series.

Nick Richards finished with 14 points, Tyler Herro added 12 points and Keldon Johnson scored 11.

Vanderbilt (9-11, 0-7) has lost eight straight. Saben Lee led the Commodores with 15 points.

No. 8 Nevada 87, UNLV 70: Caleb Martin had 26 points and six rebounds in leading the visiting Wolf Pack past UNLV.

Since losing at New Mexico on Jan. 5, Nevada (20-1, 7-1 Mountain West) has won six straight — five by double digits.

The Runnin' Rebels (11-9, 5-3) lost their second in a row and third in five games.

Jordan Caroline added 18 points and 10 rebounds for Nevada, his 12th double-double of the season. Cody Martin chipped in with 10 points, seven assists and six rebounds.

No. 9 North Carolina 77, Georgia Tech 54: Cameron Johnson scored 22 points and the visiting Tar Heels won their fourth straight game.

Coby White added 19 points and shot 5-for-9 from three-point range for North Carolina (16-4, 6-1 ACC).

Abdoulaye Gueye scored 14 points to lead Georgia Tech (11-10, 3-5).

Texas 73, No. 11 Kansas 63: Dylan Osetkowski scored 16 points and the host Longhorns used stifling defense to snap a 10-game losing streak to Kansas.



GERIN BROOME/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Virginia's Kyle Guy drives past North Carolina State's C.J. Bryce, left, and Wyatt Walker during the second half on Tuesday. Guy hit the go-ahead three-pointer in overtime, and the Cavaliers won 66-65.

Texas hadn't beaten the Jayhawks since 2014.

Texas held Kansas' leading scorer Dedric Lawson without a point in the first half, and the Jayhawks to their fewest points in a half this season.

Back in the Big 12, Texas (12-4, 4-4) got a much-needed win that also knocked the Jayhawks (16-5, 5-3) out of first place. Kansas has lost three of its last four.

Ochai Agbaji led Kansas with 24 points.

No. 18 Buffalo 83, Ball State 59: Donta Carruthers scored 21 points and the host Bulls cruised to their 21st straight home victory.

CJ Massenburg had 16 points and nine rebounds, while a smothering defense forced 18 turnovers as Buffalo scored the first seven points and never trailed.

Buffalo (19-2, 7-1 Mid-American Conference) hasn't dropped a home game since a 73-62 loss to St. Bonaventure on Dec. 2, 2017. The 21-game streak is the second-longest in the nation behind No. 13 Houston's 30 in a row at home.

K.J. Walton scored 18 before fouling out for Ball State (11-10, 2-6).

No. 21 Maryland 70, Northwestern 52: Bruno Fernando had 22 points and 10 rebounds, freshman Jalen Smith scored 14 points and the host Terps emphatically ended a two-game skid.

It was the third straight double-

double and 13th of the season for Fernando, a 6-foot-10 sophomore who helped Maryland (17-5, 8-3 Big Ten) finish with a 44-28 rebounding advantage.

Anthony Gaines scored 18 points and Deric Pardon added 14 for the Wildcats (12-9, 3-7).

Alabama 83, No. 22 Mississippi State 79: Donta Hall scored 19 points to lead the host Tide to the upset over the Bulldogs.

John Petty scored 13 points and Riley Norris added 11 for Alabama (13-7, 4-3 Southeastern Conference), which built a 12-point lead at halftime.

Reggie Perry led Mississippi State (15-5, 3-4) with 18 points on 9-for-12 shooting.

No. 24 Wisconsin 62, Nebraska 51: Brad Davison scored 10 of his 13 points in the second half and fueled the visiting Badgers' decisive surge in the win over the Cornhuskers.

Wisconsin (15-6, 7-3 Big Ten) won its fourth straight game.

Nebraska (13-8, 3-7), playing its first game without injured forward Isaac Copeland, lost its fourth straight and sixth in eight games. The 51 points were a season low.

Ethan Happ and Nate Revers scored 10 points apiece for Wisconsin.

Isaiah Roby, who moved from center to power forward in Copeland's absence, had 18 points, nine rebounds, three assists and two blocks.

It's not just where Auburn was

Defensive issues plaguing Auburn

By JOHN ZENOR
Associated Press

AUBURN, Ala. — The Auburn Tigers are still scoring at a high rate. The problem is, so are their opponents.

The Tigers, who spent six weeks in the top 10, have dropped from the rankings this week after their first three-game losing streak in nearly two years.

"The biggest thing that is ailing us is our defense," Auburn coach Bruce Pearl said Tuesday.

Scoring hasn't been the problem for Auburn (13-6, 2-4 Southeastern Conference), which was to host Missouri (10-8, 1-5) Wednesday night.

The Tigers are averaging 80 points during the current skid. But they've forced an average of just 12 turnovers a game while allowing the last three opponents to hit slightly more than half their shots collectively.

Even an offense that ranks behind only No. 1 Tennessee in points per game in the SEC can't bank on that being enough every time. In SEC games, the Tigers rank last in the league giving up 80 points on average and allowing opponents to shoot 46.6 percent.

"If we're able to fix it, we'll get back to winning," Pearl said. "If we're not, then losing will continue. It's as simple as that."

Defensive issues might be a harder fix than, say, a team that's just in a temporary shooting slump. They've been especially pronounced since league play started.

But the Tigers have enough offensive firepower to compensate much of the time, with Bryce Brown and Jared Harper leading four double-figure scorers.

Auburn has been competitive in all three losses, against No. 7 Kentucky (82-80), at South Carolina (80-77) and at No. 22 Mississippi State (92-84). The Tigers play their next three at Auburn Arena, where their only loss was to the Wildcats.

It hasn't helped that center Austin Wiley has missed the past three games with a lower right leg injury. Pearl said Wiley won't play against Missouri either, but didn't rule him out for Saturday night against Alabama.

The poor SEC start is surprising for a veteran team that returned star guards Harper and Brown and most of the other key players after claiming a share of the regular-season title last season.

Now, they're receiving the 26th-most votes in the AP rankings. Pearl says this is "a pivotal year for us" but also puts a positive spin on the Tigers' situation.

"There's a lot of teams in the country that would trade places with us right now at 13-6 and 26th in the country," Pearl said.

It's not just where Auburn was

COLLEGE FOOTBALL/SPORTS BRIEFS

NCAA looking to put limit on OT in football

By RALPH D. RUSSO

Associated Press

Marathon overtime games in college football, such as the one LSU and Texas A&M played last season, are already rare. The NCAA would like them to become extinct.

Concerned about increased injury risk to players, the football rules committee later this month will consider tweaks to the overtime format. The goal is to make it less likely for games to go beyond two extra possessions for each team.

Among the more radical ideas set to be discussed is going to a 2-point-conversion shootout after teams have played two full OT possessions.

"The overtime process is really not broken," said Steve Shaw, the national coordinator of football officials. "It's just when you go beyond two (overtime possessions), it's too much."

The committee meets the last week of February in Indianapolis and will also — again — discuss targeting. The American Football Coaches Association wants to make targeting a two-tiered foul, with a 15-yard penalty for some helmet hits and 15 yards plus ejection for more malicious hits. Currently, all targeting fouls result in ejection. A similar change was considered last year, but shot down and the same seems likely this year. However, other changes will be discussed that could lead to fewer ejections.

The current overtime format, implemented in 1996, gives each team possession at the opponent's 25-yard line, and repeats the process until one team has outscored the other. After two possessions by each team, the offense must try a 2-point conversion instead of kicking an extra point after a touchdown.

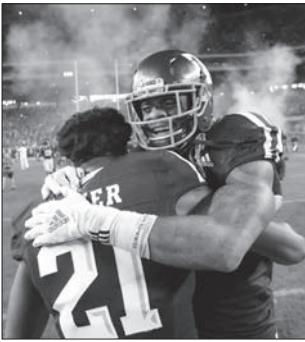
On average, 37 Bowl Subdivision games have gone to overtime over the past four seasons. Most end after one round of possessions. Only six games per season have gone past two overtimes. LSU and Texas A&M tied a record by playing seven overtime periods in November. The Aggies won 74-72 and the team ran 207 offensive plays, an average regulation game feature 140.

"Obviously that's a lot of exertion on the student-athletes," said West Virginia athletic director Shane Lyons, who is in his first year as the chairman of the NCAA's football oversight committee.

There is no support to allow games to end in ties, which were part of college football for decades.

Shaw said he has received dozens of ideas about how to tweak overtime. The most common have to do with placement of the ball. With offenses operating more efficiently than ever, moving the starting line back 10 or 15 yards could make scoring more difficult. The rules committee will also consider eliminating extra point tries, forcing teams to go for 2 from the very first possession.

These seem to be the most likely next steps, but other more creative measures will also be considered, Shaw said.



DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP

Texas A&M wide receiver Kendrick Rogers, right, celebrates with Charles Oliver after their 74-72 win in seven overtimes against LSU on Nov. 24 in College Station, Texas. Marathon overtime games in college football are rare. The NCAA would like to make them extinct by tweaking its overtime format.

Since the 2-point play often decides the longer overtime games — Texas A&M-LSU finally ended on the Aggies' made conversion after LSU tried one and failed — why not go straight to 2-point plays from the 2-yard line after each team has had the ball twice? The first team to get a score and a stop wins.

Shaw said eliminating all place kicking in overtime will also be discussed. This could help address a less important issue: the team that wins the coin toss for overtime usually wins the game. Typically, the team that wins the toss chooses to play defense first so it knows what it will take to win when it has the ball.

"I don't know if that's going to be very popular, but we'll talk about it," Shaw said.

As they will with targeting.

While coaches support the two-tiered penalty, the commissioners who manage the NCAA's College Football Officiating LLC see it as backing away from a rule meant to address player safety.

"It's either targeting or it's not, and right now the targeting penalty carries with it an ejection," Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby said.

Shaw said the rules committee will consider changing the way replay review is used in targeting as a way to improve the accuracy of the calls — and maybe have less marginal calls result in ejections.

Currently, replay review can confirm a ruling on the field, overturn it to decide the call stands if there is not enough video evidence to overturn. The committee will consider eliminating the call stands ruling, allowing replay officials to overturn calls that cannot be confirmed.

"We look forward to having a really good dialogue with the AFC on this," Mid-American Conference Commissioner Jon Steinbrecher said. "I think we all have the same goal in mind and that's let's get it right."

Briefly

Jones granted license to fight at UFC 235

Associated Press

UFC 235.

LAS VEGAS — UFC light heavyweight champion Jon Jones was granted a one-fight license by the Nevada State Athletic Commission on Tuesday, clearing the way for his title defense against Anthony Smith at UFC 235 on March 2.

Jones had a hearing in front of the commission regarding the M3 metabolite, oral turinabol, for which he tested positive prior to his fight against Alexander Gustafsson at UFC 232 on Dec. 29, originally set for Las Vegas.

The NSAC did not license Jones to fight in Nevada due to the unknown circumstances of why he tested positive for the same substance that got him suspended for 15 months in July 2017. The commission did not know of the test results until Dec. 21.

That event was moved to Southern California, and Jones defeated Gustafsson by knockout in the third round to reclaim the vacated title once held by Daniel Cormier.

"Thank you so much to USAADA, the Nevada State Athletic Commission, my team, the UFC, mainly the fans and everyone sticking by me throughout this process, allowing me to say my piece, allowing me to go through this process, eventually proving my innocence," Jones said following the hearing.

Jones was granted the license upon the conditions that he must be tested at least twice a month until the end of the year. Those tests will be administered by the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USAADA), the Voluntary Anti-Doping Agency (VADA) and any other athletic commission he's licensed with. Jones will pay for those tests himself leading up to

Those results will be reported to the NSAC, which will conduct its own tests of Jones upon its discretion.

"At the end of the day, I feel very confident that he does not have any performance-enhancing capabilities when he walks into the Octagon come March 2 if the tests continue to stay consistent," said NSAC chairman Anthony Marinelli III. "I'm confident that the frequency in which he will be tested for 12 months, we will have a better set of data."

Jones told the commission that he never took oral turinabol, but is unsure how the substance entered his system.

"It's the fight capital of the world," Jones said in his testimony on why he enjoys fighting in Nevada. "One of my personal goals from Day 1 is to bring more awareness to mixed-martial arts and being able to do that in Las Vegas."

Jones will be tested at least twice leading up to his title bout.

Predators' Watson suspended again

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Nashville Predators forward Austin Watson has been suspended without pay as part of the NHL's substance abuse program.

The NHL and NHL Players' Association announced Tuesday that Watson had been placed in Stage Two of the league's substance abuse and behavioral health program "for treatment related exclusively to his ongoing issues with alcohol abuse."

That means Watson is suspended without pay until program administrators clear him to return.

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NBA/NHL



ERIC CHRISTIAN SMITH/AP

Pelicans forward Anthony Davis watches from the bench during the first half of New Orleans' game against the Rockets on Tuesday in Houston. Davis missed his fifth straight game with an injury.

NBA fines Davis over trade demand

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Anthony Davis' agent let everyone know he wants out of New Orleans, and now it will cost his client \$50,000.

The NBA fined the Pelicans star because of his agent's comments that Davis won't sign an extension and wants to be traded.

The league office said in a written statement released Tuesday evening that Davis violated a collectively-bargained rule prohibiting players or their representatives from making public trade demands.

The NBA said the fine is for statements that were made by Davis' agent, Rich Paul, on Monday in an intentional effort to undermine the contractual relationship between Davis and the Pelicans.

Davis is under contract with New Orleans through the end of the 2019-20 season.

He was drafted by the Pelicans with the first overall pick in 2012 after winning an NCAA national championship with Kentucky and has been named an All-Star the previous five seasons.

However, the Pelicans have made the playoffs in only two of six full NBA seasons and won only two playoff series, sweeping Portland in the first round last season before falling in five games to champion Golden State in the second round.

Davis has averaged 29.3 points and 13.3 rebounds per game this

season, but has missed the past five games with a sprained left index finger while the Pelicans have fallen to 23-28.

Had Davis been committed to remaining in New Orleans, he would be eligible this summer for a five-year, roughly \$240 million extension that would have kicked in beginning with the 2020-21 season.

In previous years, Davis had professed his affection for New Orleans. But Davis has also said that his NBA salary is secondary to winning — a clear sign to Pelicans management that they could not take re-signing him for granted if they failed to surround him with players who would make New Orleans a contender.

When healthy, the Pelicans have looked formidable in short spurts, but injuries have exposed their lack of depth and cohesion as they've slipped near the bottom of the Western Conference through the first half of this season.

The Pelicans have acknowledged Davis' preference to be traded and appear inclined to honor it rather than lose him for nothing. But a statement from the franchise made it clear that the Pelicans' brass is prepared to be patient while awaiting a deal done on their terms and timeline.

The implication is that a trade may not come before the Feb. 7 deadline to make a deal this season, and more likely could come after the season, when 2019 draft slots are known.

Davis has averaged 29.3 points and 13.3 rebounds per game this

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Tampa Bay	49	37	10	2	76	199	140
Toronto	49	30	17	2	62	174	140
Boston	51	26	21	4	62	145	132
Buffalo	49	25	18	6	56	145	148
Philadelphia	49	24	19	6	54	145	148
Detroit	51	19	25	7	45	145	172
Ottawa	50	16	26	3	34	135	187

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
NY. Islanders	49	29	15	5	63	147	122
Washington	50	26	17	6	60	177	162
NY. Rangers	49	26	18	4	54	158	151
Pittsburgh	49	26	17	6	58	172	152
Florida	49	21	21	7	49	139	165
Philadelphia	50	21	23	6	48	143	170
New Jersey	49	19	33	7	45	140	167

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	50	30	18	4	64	161	135
Nashville	50	26	21	5	55	142	142
Minnesota	50	26	21	4	55	142	142
Colorado	50	22	20	8	52	162	162
St. Louis	49	18	34	9	49	139	190
Chicago	50	16	34	9	48	139	189

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Calgary	51	33	13	7	71	190	145
New Jersey	50	29	21	6	65	157	161
Pittsburgh	50	29	19	6	62	157	161
Vegas	50	29	21	6	62	157	161
Arizona	51	24	27	6	52	147	153
San Jose	50	23	23	4	50	132	142
Edmonton	50	21	25	3	46	135	153
Los Angeles	50	20	26	4	44	114	150

Note: Two points for a win, one point for an overtime win, and one point for conference advance to playoffs.

New Jersey 6, Pittsburgh 3

Philadelphia 3, Winnipeg 1

Tampa Bay 3, Islanders 1

Philadelphia 2, Columbus 1

Calgary 3, Pittsburgh 2

Tampa Bay 3, Islanders 2

Ottawa at Pittsburgh

Chicago 2, Buffalo 1

Atlanta 2, Florida 1

Vegas at Carolina

Toronto at Detroit

Minnesota at Dallas

Thursday's games

New York 3, Philadelphia 2

Philadelphia 3, Boston 2

Calgary 3, Boston 2

Tampa Bay 3, Islanders 2

Ottawa at Pittsburgh

Chicago 2, Buffalo 1

Atlanta 2, Florida 1

Vegas at Carolina

Toronto at Detroit

Minnesota at Dallas

Wednesday's games

Tampa Bay 3, Pittsburgh 2

Buffalo 3, Philadelphia 2

Calgary 3, Boston 2

Tampa Bay 3, Islanders 2

Ottawa at Pittsburgh

Chicago 2, Buffalo 1

Atlanta 2, Florida 1

Vegas at Carolina

Toronto at Detroit

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Ottawa at Pittsburgh

SUPER BOWL

Falcons guard Garland wins Salute to Service Award

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Atlanta Falcons guard Ben Garland has won the NFL's Salute to Service Award.

Garland was recognized Wednesday by the league and USAA for his exceptional efforts to honor and support members of the military community. He will be recognized on Saturday night during NFL Honors, the prime-time TV show in which The Associated Press presents its individual awards for the 2018 season.

"I am honored to win the award, but, honestly, I am just honored to be part of an organization that puts military first from the top down, from (owner) Arthur Blank to our head coach (Dan Quinn)," Garland said. "They do so much for our military and I am proud to be a part of an organization that is the spear in the NFL of showing how to do it right and how to truly give back and say thank you to the military members that absolutely deserve it."

USAA, a leading provider of insurance and other services to U.S. military members, veterans and their families, will contribute \$25,000 in Garland's honor to the official aid societies representing all five military branches. The NFL will match USAA's donation of \$25,000, which will be donated to Garland's military charity of choice.

"From his time at the Air Force Academy and continuing throughout his NFL playing career, Ben Garland has embodied and demonstrated the understanding and appreciation for the service and sacrifice of the U.S. military and their families for which this award stands," said Vice Admiral (Ret.) John Bird, USAA senior vice president of military affairs. "In the true spirit of the Salute to Service Award presented by USAA, we salute Ben for his tireless effort to support our military, veterans, and their families, as well as his own service to our country as a member of the Colorado Air National Guard."

In 2018, Garland traveled on two USO tours, the first to Italy and Germany and the second to Iraq and Kuwait.

Garland is involved with helping veterans make the adjustment after their service and in helping raise awareness of PTSD. Last year, he participated



DANNY KARNIK/AP

Atlanta Falcons offensive guard Ben Garland won the NFL's Salute to Service Award. Garland was recognized Wednesday by the league and USAA for his exceptional efforts to honor and support members of the military community.

in the Armed Forces Mission's Georgia LOSS Walk. He walked alongside veterans, service members and their families in honor of "Turning the Tide on Veteran Suicide."

As a current member of the Colorado Air National Guard, he also supports his fellow active duty service members. He donates game tickets each week to them visits the Air Force Academy at least once a year to speak to the current students; works with Georgia Tech ROTC to inspire young officers; and meets with local young officers to mentor them.

Garland was chosen for the award by a panel that included the 2017 recipient, Andre Roberts of the New York Jets; Bird; Chad Henning, an Air Force Academy graduate and three-time Super Bowl champion; former wide receiver Vincent Jackson, the 2015 award recipient; for NFL coach Jim Mora; and Lenny Bandy, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and an NFL vice president of security.

It not unlike the determination used to describe Brady, who at age 41 continues to prove his skeptics wrong.

"He's a really good football player, the best," Edelman said. "He goes out and he consistently proves it. He's one of our leaders and he's a leader for a reason."

Though they first met as teammates in New England when Edelman was drafted by the Patriots a decade ago, he and Brady took remarkably similar paths to get to the NFL.

Both natives of California, each of them grew up idolizing the San Francisco 49ers' dynasty led by Joe Montana and Rice. Brady played his college ball at Michigan, with Edelman eventually choosing Kent State across the border in Ohio.

Their stories continued to mirror each other when it came time for the NFL Draft.

Brady infamously wasn't selected until the sixth round in 2000. Edelman, an understudied quarterback who switched to receiver, didn't hear his name called until



JOHN BAZEMORE/AP

Rams defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh listens to questions during media availability Tuesday, in Atlanta, ahead of Sunday's Super Bowl.

No reputation remake for Rams' veteran Suh

BY GEORGE HENRY
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Ndamukong Suh says he has not gone about trying to remake his reputation in his first and perhaps only season with the Los Angeles Rams.

The mammoth defensive tackle and three-time All-Pro was notorious for racking up fines and suspensions that cost him over \$400,000 in his first five seasons, all with the Detroit Lions.

"I'm not sure if anything's changed," the ninth-year veteran said. "I still aggressive. I still like to get after the quarterback. I don't know. You have to ask the refs."

The second overall draft choice in 2010, Suh was fined more than \$20,054 for a horse-collar tackle

early last month in his return to Detroit. But says he's been mostly satisfied with laying low after signing a one-year, \$14 million deal with the Rams last April.

He went so far as to say he doesn't "mind being in the shadows" — he plays next to Aaron Donald, the only unanimous choice for the 2018 All-Pro squad — and called himself an introvert. That's quite a transformation for a player with so much negative attention early in his career.

"I think everybody's got to have their own opinion and look at it for what it actually is," Suh said. "I mean obviously there's mishaps that have taken place early in my career, but some people choose to run with it for years. Some people choose to run with it for days. End of story. It's up to them."

Bromance: Pats' duo developed own ways of communicating on field



CHARLES KRUPA/AP

Patriots wide receiver Julian Edelman, left, talks with quarterback Tom Brady during a preseason game. Edelman and Brady are preparing to play in their fourth Super Bowl together.

FROM BACK PAGE

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'You've got two fiery guys. I think it's fun to watch.'

Jason McCourt
Patriots cornerback

own sort of silent language on the field, and have unique ways to hype up each other.

An example was during the AFC championship game when video captured Edelman in Brady's face yelling, "You're too old!" as Brady sat on the bench after throwing a first-touchdown pass.

"You've got two fiery guys. I think it's fun to watch," Patriots cornerback Jason McCourt said. "You see two guys that are the ultimate competitor. How hard they both compete in practice, you see the bromance at times, you see the fiery looks they give each other sometimes if someone messes up. Just that look of disappointment, of just like 'get it together.' I think it's almost like brothers."

Brady said he continues to be amazed by Edelman.

"Look at his stature. He wasn't built like Megatron (Calvin Johnson). He's just built the way he was built and I think he's just worked so hard over the years to learn how to play receiver," Brady said. "He's just done an incredible job."

SUPER BOWL

Cooks grabs second title shot after trade

Postseason shaped up as revenge tour for Rams WR playing two former teams

By GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

ATLANTA — In the past three NFL seasons alone, Brandin Cooks has caught passes from Drew Brees, Tom Brady and Jared Goff while playing for Sean Payton, Bill Belichick and Sean McVay.

"I guess I know how to pick 'em, right?" Cooks asked Tuesday with a laugh.

Cooks has racked up 3,786 yards receiving and 21 total touchdowns in that three-season span, which will include six playoff games and two consecutive Super Bowls.

He played for the Patriots in the big game last year, and he will play against them for the Los Angeles Rams on Sunday. He is also the first player in NFL history to have three consecutive 1,000-yard receiving seasons with three different teams.

But there are asterisks on this incredible résumé.

Cooks was only able to accomplish these feats because he was traded before each of the past two seasons, changing teams twice before he turned 25 years old.

Two elite NFL franchises—New Orleans and New England—decided they could do without the speedy, dependable receiver, giving him up for first-round picks.

Although he has been asked about it almost daily during the Rams' playoff run, Cooks insists he harbors no ill will against the Saints or the Patriots.

The Rams' postseason could have been a personal revenge tour, but Cooks says it means nothing to him that his two former teams are Los Angeles' final two playoff opponents. The

Rams beat New Orleans 26-23 in the NFC championship game, and they will face the Patriots in the Super Bowl.

While Cooks claims he didn't take it personally, he also acknowledges using the trades as motivation during his fourth consecutive 1,000-yard season and the subsequent playoff grind.

"It's fuel to the fire," Cooks said. "I know that I can play this game at a high level, whether someone thinks it or not. For them to trade me, it's part of the game, but it also gives me that motivation to keep going, too."

Brandin Cooks
Rams WR

whether someone thinks it or not. For them to trade me, it's part of the game, but it also gives me that motivation to keep going, too."

This Super Bowl is a particular opportunity for Cooks, who realizes how fortunate he is to return to football's biggest stage for a second straight year. Cooks caught just one pass for the Patriots against Philadelphia last season before he was sidelined with a concussion, missing most of the big-game of his life.

"I would be lying if I said I didn't think

about it like all year, offseason and train-



BUTCH DILL/AP

Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Brandin Cooks, right, pulls in a touchdown reception in front of New Orleans Saints free safety Marcus Williams in the first half of the regular season game in New Orleans on Nov. 4. Cooks is the first player in NFL history to have three consecutive 1,000-yard receiving seasons with three different teams.

ing camp," Cooks said. "But now that I'm here, I've got that thought process out of my mind."

Cooks has avoided constant attempts to get him to compare the inner workings of the Patriots and Rams this week, deliberately giving simplistic, short answers such as: "They're both great cultures. That's the similarity."

But it's clear he has found a home in his native California with the Rams, who have lavished praise on him ever since his arrival. They even signed him to a five-year, \$80 million contract extension before he played a game in LA, and he rewarded them with a career-best 1,204 yards receiving.

"I can promise you this: We're not trading him," McVay said Tuesday.

Cooks has shown his reciprocal devotion to the Rams in many ways. Just last week, he surprised team custodian Alfonso Garcia by paying for two tickets to the Super Bowl for Garcia and his 8-year-old son.

The Patriots had had only good things to say about their former receiver even though Belichick kept him for only one season before making the trade to maximize his value, rather than signing him to the type of long-term contract New England has often avoided. The Pats used the Rams' first-round pick on offensive tackle Isaiah Wynn, who tore his Achilles tendon in the preseason.

Belichick, Brady and other Patriots praised Cooks' work ethic and talent this week.

"He was a great guy to have in the room,

a hard-working teammate, and he's a real playmaker," New England receiver Chris Hogan said.

Hogan said that although he was dazzled by Cooks' speed, "when I'd see on film I was even with him or ahead of him, I made sure to point it out."

Even though he has impressive numbers for Los Angeles, Cooks is sold on McVay's culture of individual sacrifice for team success. In fact, Cooks is getting some of his biggest praise for a strategic drop in New Orleans.

On a third-down play with the Rams on the edge of long field-goal range in overtime, Goff threw a short backfield pass to Cooks with Saints defenders bearing down.

Instead of catching it and probably taking a 4-yard loss on a play that McVay immediately regretted calling, Cooks intentionally dropped it. Shortly afterward, Greg Zuerlein made a 57-yard field goal to send the Rams to their first Super Bowl in 17 years.

No matter what happens in his second shot at the Super Bowl, Cooks seems certain to be a key component of Los Angeles' offense next season along with Robert Woods and the injured Cooper Kupp, who formed one of the most potent receiver trios in the league when they were together this season. Cooks is also eager for another year to build chemistry with Goff.

"To be put with a young quarterback that's the same age as me, and to know you have the chance to be together for a long time, that's a blessing," Cooks said.

Did you know

Brandin Cooks is the first player in NFL history to have three straight 1,000-yard receiving seasons with three different teams. He beat one, the Saints, in the playoffs and faces the other in Sunday's Super Bowl.



SOURCE: AP

SPORTS



Cavaliers survive in OT

No. 3 Virginia holds off
No. 23 NC State » Page 26

SUPER BOWL

Bromance isn't dead

Bond between Patriots QB Brady, WR Edelman helps put team in title contention again

BY KYLE HIGHTOWER
Associated Press

Teammates have called their relationship a "bromance." Patriots quarterback Tom Brady himself openly uses the word love to describe his bond with Julian Edelman, a receiver he's come to depend on during his career.

As the duo prepares to play in a fourth Super Bowl together, each says the connection might be tighter than ever — both on and off the field.

"We have a great relationship. Jules and I, and I trust him so much," Brady says. "He's always been kind of like my little brother, in a good way. I don't have a little brother, but he's kind of like a little brother and he knows how much I love him."

In Edelman's case, it's a little brother who has established himself as one of the best slot receivers in Patriots history.

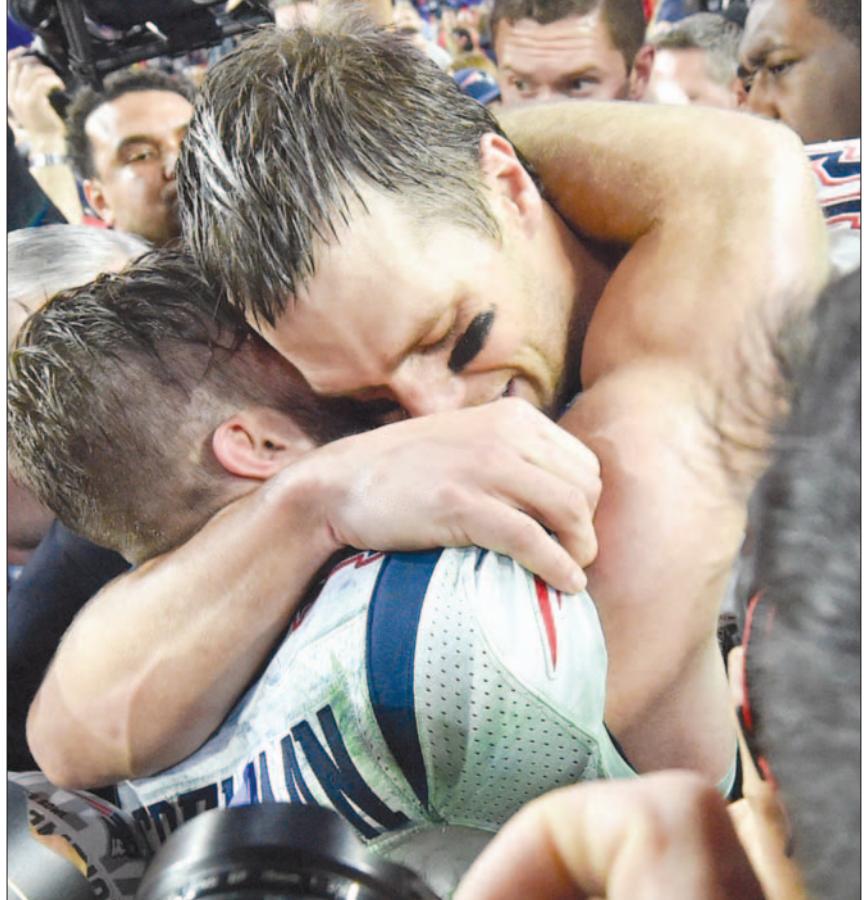
He missed the entire 2017 season with a torn ACL and the first four games of this season for violating the league's performance enhancers policy. But the 32-year-old helped Brady steady an offense that struggled early this season and had to adjust following the suspension of Josh Gordon heading into the final two games.

Edelman ended the regular season with a team-high 850 receiving yards and was second on the team with 74 receptions and six touchdowns. His production has continued through New England's first two playoff games, with Edelman hauling in 16 catches for a team-high 247 yards.

Heading into the matchup with the Rams, his 1,271 postseason receiving yards are the most in Patriots history. There are also just two receivers in NFL postseason history with over 100 catches: Jerry Rice with 151 and Edelman with 105.

It's earned him high compliments not only from Brady, but from Rice, who praised Edelman as someone who has an attitude of "I'm going to do what I want to do, and I'm going to go out and I'm going to ball."

SEE BROMANCE ON PAGE 30



ANTHONY BEHR/TNS

Quarterback Tom Brady celebrates with teammate Julian Edelman, who caught the go ahead touchdown to win Super Bowl XLIV in 2015. The pair's strong relationship on and off the field have contributed to the team's success again this season.

LA's Cooks earns second shot at Super Bowl » Page 31

